

## This Mess of Moments by crystalkei

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**Summary:**

“Remember how you said that he doesn’t know where to stab to make you bleed the most?”

She did remember. Another time where they'd both come out swinging at each other instead of the forces that knocked them down.

“It’s not true. You’re just fighting so hard you don’t even feel it. You’re bleeding all over the place.”

*Joyce and Hopper through the years*

## **This Mess of Moments**

### **Author's Note:**

so...this was supposed to be a five times fic and I very quickly lost control. It's now a lengthy one shot with plot and everything. My spiral into the shipper hole is your gain.

**1963**

Coming out of chemistry, his last class of the day, was like taking a deep breath of fresh air. And seeing Joyce perched on the hood of his car, her pencil skirt hiked up as she let the sun reach all the way above her knees was a much needed reminder that life wasn't always boring chemical bonds. But if any of the escaping teachers caught her with her skirt up like that, she'd be fucked.

"If you're gonna sit there, at least wiggle your ass a little to buff the hood," he joked as he got closer to her.

She rolled her eyes and flicked her cigarette butt in his direction before hopping down and leaning against his door.

"You gonna survive Mr. Cook?" she asked, looking up at him as he got closer. She was so small.

"Any chance you'll do my work for me?" He cocked an eyebrow but she rolled her eyes again.

"I already did that work last semester and I'm sure as hell not doing it again. Go find a new girlfriend for that."

Hopper tossed his books through the window behind her, then slid his hand up her side as he leaned down to kiss her.

"You gotta stop hiking your skirt up like that," he said, as he pulled away.

"I don't care who sees my legs, and you don't get a say."

"I care if you get detention," he said, opening the door. "Really cuts into our making out time."

Joyce slid into the driver's seat and then scooted into the middle. Hopper followed her into the car:

"If the teachers don't want to see my legs, maybe they'll let us girls wear pants to school."

He laughed. "I like skirts, easier access," he said, putting a hand on below her knee and skimming the bare skin up until he settled on her lower thigh. Nothing too indecent. He did need to drive after all.

She flicked his ear, annoyed. "You're a dick, Hop." But she smiled.

He pulled the car out of the parking lot and headed down the road.

"At what point did everyone stop calling you 'Jimmy?'" Joyce asked, running her hand up the back of his head and mussing the hair on top.

He batted her hand away and used the motion as an excuse to put his arm around her shoulder.

"In seventh grade, when Jimmy Mahoney moved in," Hopper said, slowing down as he approached Joyce's house.

She could easily walk to and from school but she opted to have him drive her home most days.

"But why didn't we all call him 'Mahoney?'" she asked like she really didn't remember. Like she didn't bring this up every other Thursday.

"Because he was bigger than me."

Joyce's lips stretched slowly into a smile. She was trying not to laugh. She was waiting for her moment, her constant punchline.

"I've seen his dick and I'm here to report that you should get your name back."

Hopper shook his head.

"How long am I going to have to endure that shitty joke? Gimme a ballpark."

"I dunno, 35 years probably."

"Oh well, that's not nearly as bad as i'd feared." He put the car in park as she gathered her things. "You want help?"

"I got it," she said, sliding across the bench seat to the passenger side door and getting out.

She walked around to his side and leaned into the window to give him a quick, chaste kiss, clutching her books to her chest.

"Do your chemistry homework before you go to work, before you forget all the shit you just learned in class. See you tomorrow, Hop."

She waved and walked toward her house.

"Cut the teachers some slack, Joyce, not every girl looks as good as you in pants!" he hollered after her.

She didn't turn around, just gave him the finger over her shoulder.

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**1965**

Joyce had heard rumors that he was back for a short time but she hadn't thought anything of it. Things were different now. They were bad when he left and now they were...different. She'd moved on.

But seeing him.

Her stomach dropped and she felt a pang of guilt. Never mind that Joyce had nothing to feel guilty for. But she knew if he found out, it was going to be messy. She considered ducking into the hardware store just to avoid him altogether, but like usual, he seemed to have a sixth sense for her.

"Joyce!" he shouted from across the street.

The hardware store looked inviting but he was already waving and coming over. She took a deep breath and steeled herself.

“Hop, hi,” she said, hoping her smile was warm enough, but not too inviting.

He reached around and hugged her tightly, his arms feeling stronger than before. No doubt about it, she felt guilty.

“How long are you home for?” she asked, when he finally released her from the hug.

He looked her over, his smile waning as he heard her question. “Just until the end of the week.”

“And then you’re shipping off, huh?” She crossed her arms, holding herself and trying not to panic.

“Yeah,” Hopper answered, evenly.

“It’s ape shit that your number came up. I just didn’t...it’s still so weird.”

“Nothing to be done about it now, free vacation to Vietnam, lucky me.” He was trying to brush it off. “Hey, about how...when I left, after graduation, I didn’t mean for it...”

Joyce closed her eyes for a second. When she opened them, contrary to her desire to be whisked away to somewhere else, Hopper still stood in front of her, looking at the cement, his hand scrubbing his neck awkwardly.

“Done and over with, nothing to be done about it.” She hoped in repeating his phrase, he’d understand.

“Let me make it right.” He looked at her, eyes soft but confident.

Joyce shook her head and felt herself take a step back as discreetly as possible. She started to fidget but focused on keeping her head in the conversation.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Hopper tilted his head, his gaze shifting to her fingers drumming against her upper arm. She tightened arms around herself.

“What happened?” he asked.

He was always too damn sharp for his own good.

“Nothing.” She nervously lifted her left hand to push some hair behind her ears, that was the slipup she didn’t want to make.

“You got married?” He sounded hurt.

Joyce winced. He wouldn’t understand but she couldn’t explain it to him either.

“You married that shit head? My mom said-”

“Hopper,” she interrupted. “It was a small ceremony, just the courthouse. Last week.”

“I’m not mad that my invitation clearly got lost in the mail, I can’t believe you-” He shook his head. “He’s a sleazebag. You coulda picked anyone but him. Half the guys in this town would-”

“Well, since I make my own choices, I didn’t consider your feelings about who *I* would marry. You don’t get a say.”

“Wait,” he held up his hand, “Did you say last week?”

Dammit. Too sharp for his own good. Again.

Another slipup. Joyce felt herself getting shaky. Telling her mom, telling her friends, none of that held the same anxiety as telling him. She didn’t want to examine why that was and thankfully there wasn’t time.

She sputtered, trying to think of some way out of this but it was too late.

“August 25th,” Hopper practically spit out. “Did he wait until the eleventh hour? LBJ himself inspire Lonnie? Did he tell you the plan or did he say he really loved you and wanted to spend the rest of his

life with you?"

"That's cruel." Joyce felt herself start to shake from rage not anxiety now. "We're in love."

"And he's in love with the draft exemption a wife provided. Have a nice life, Joyce."

He turned to stomp off and she couldn't help herself. She was livid.

"Stay safe over there," she almost taunted.

"Fuck off!" was the only reply she got.

There was no reason for her to feel guilty. He'd broken up with her and he'd gone to Indianapolis, then his draft number had come up, and it wasn't her fault. None of that was her fault. Hopper was a dick. That wasn't her fault, either.

All she did was date and marry someone else. He'd do that too eventually and that'd be the end of all this. Then they could maybe be friends again.

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## 1979

When he was a kid, the deep, dark sky with its hundreds of tiny pinpoints of light were calming. His mother would shut his curtains before she tucked him in but once she closed the door he'd slip out of bed and pull the curtains back. Sometimes he'd fall asleep like that and his mother would scold him in the morning. "Why'd we buy you a bed if you just wanna lie on the floor next to the window?"

Thinking back on it, with a parent's eyes now, it seemed absurd that they wouldn't just move his bed closer to the window, but instead he was trained to stay in his bed, curtains closed, or at least, he learned not to fall asleep gazing at the bright stars.

In the city you couldn't see the stars like you could out here in Hawkins. The lights from the little town had gotten brighter since he was a kid but that's why he bought this little stretch of land by the

lake. It was almost outside the city limits, away from the streetlights and soft glow of the neon signs of the shops in town.

But tonight, the formerly comforting stars threatened to swallow him whole, pressing down on him like the grief that he'd come to know intimately over the last year.

He wasn't surprised to hear the knock on the door, just surprised to see who was behind it.

People knew he was back. Knew he'd gotten the Chief of Police job. He'd start next week. His mother was thrilled to have him back, especially after the death of his father a few years before.

"Joyce Byers." His cigarette hung lazily from his lips and he opened his mouth only enough to speak. "What do you want?" It was harsher than he wanted but he had a good excuse and of anyone, he knew she wouldn't back down.

She bristled but he saw her straighten her back, her fingers tightening on the paper sack she held. She rolled the top of the bag a little more, the only indicator that her nerves couldn't be stilled. Someone else wouldn't notice it, but he did. Then again, it had been years, maybe he was wrong.

"I came to check on you," she said, firmly. "Can I come in?"

Hopper stood, leaning halfway out of the trailer, Joyce on the cinder block stairs, (he'd need to build a proper porch but not this week) while he considered his options. It was one of those nights where nothing would diminish the overwhelming darkness, so, why not? And maybe that paperbag held liquor. A guy could hope.

He stepped to the side and she took his cue and walked up the last step and into the trailer. She didn't mention that there was only the bare bulb over the kitchen sink lighting the room. But he did catch her frown.

"You bought this trailer new?"

"Yeah," he said, putting out his cigarette in the tray on the counter.



“Sofa City, on Independence street, they’re the best place for furniture now,” she said, spinning around and taking in the lack thereof. “Since Patterson’s closed.”

“I’ll probably head over there day after tomorrow.” The bag she held rustled as she pulled it closer to her. “What’s in the bag?”

“Oh!”

She shoved it towards him, he didn’t realize how close he was standing to her until she pressed the bag into his chest, her arms didn’t even fully extend. Is this how they always stood? Discarding the thought quickly, he took the bag, careful to avoid her hands, and then opened it.

It was hard to see in the dim light, but he could make out the browns and tans and oranges of yarn strung together.

“Is this an afghan?” he asked, lifting it out of the bag and unfurling it.

“Yes,” she answered, her tone neutral, like she wasn’t sure how he was taking it.

Truthfully, he wasn’t sure how to take it. He’d really been hoping for booze so this had thrown him off. It was scratchy, and no one could ever suggest that an afghan was meant for warmth, they were full of elaborate designs that focused on...holes. Like oversized, slightly softer, lace.

“It’s kinda crooked,” he said, before he caught himself.

“Like your dick,” Joyce came back without missing a beat.

He laughed. A short bark. But genuinely, he felt a little spark in his chest. He wasn’t sure when the last time he’d felt something so bright. Over a dick joke. She had more dick jokes. God, she made so many dick jokes. It was one of the most attractive things about her in school. This tiny, grumpy, firecracker of a person who made inappropriate jokes.

“Did you knit this?”

Joyce gave him a look. "I crocheted it. Knitting is for old ladies."

"Oh," Hopper said, with a scoff. "Well."

"Shut up. If you don't want it, I'll take it back." She reached for it but he ripped it away from her, sidestepping her reach and walking into the living room.

He had a couch, ugly and old from his parent's basement. He'd been sleeping on it and putting off buying the rest of the furniture to make the place livable. Living comfortable was something he had decided to ignore.

"I want it, I want it," he said, arranging it on the back of the couch.

Joyce followed him over, and spent a few minutes trying to adjust the side she was closest too. Hopper sat, and watched her work a minute before gesturing for her to sit. She sat, cautiously, like she was ready to spring up and run out at any moment, but she sat.

"So, did she get the house in the city?" Joyce asked, it was direct and he hated that she brought it up so easily.

"Like you got your house in the divorce."

"But I bet you'd pay child support," she replied.

Hopper just stared at her for a second, the cutting remark stunned and hurt him. Reminding him of all he'd lost. But there wasn't much to argue over. She was right.

"I know a guy in local law enforcement," he said, shifting to her problem.

"Like that would do any good," Joyce said, turning to sit sideways with her back against the armrest so she could pick at little stray bits of yarn on his new afghan.

"Are the boys okay? You've got boys, right?"

"Jonathan's 13 now so I tucked Will into bed and told Jonathan I'd be back in a couple hours," she explained.

That wasn't what he meant by the question but they didn't seem to be doing so well at this talking thing so he let that go.

"How'd you know I was home?"

"Your mom," Joyce answered, the whisper of a smile on her face.

"She's a goddamn gossip," Hopper grouched.

Joyce narrowed her eyes. "Be nice to her! She comes into the store and loves to tell me things."

"So you've got the inside line on the gossip, then?" He felt himself grin, the pull of it felt foreign.

"Yeah." She returned his smile, but just barely, just for a second before her eyes cast down again. "I meant to send flowers...when she told me, last year-"

"Flowers die, just another harsh reminder."

He hadn't ever told anyone that. He'd always wanted to tell Diane but she felt differently. She found religion in the midst of all the cancer bullshit and there was some Christ metaphor about flowers. He didn't give a shit but he didn't want to make Diane cry one more minute so he kept it to himself.

"Guess that makes me a great friend for being on a budget and not sending them," Joyce said. "That tip belongs in Reader's Digest. 'Your friends might find flowers a harsh reminder of the cycle of life and death, send a casserole instead.'"

"Or a crooked afghan," he added, with a snort.

"No, afghans are for divorce, not death." She sighed, exasperated. "It's like you're not even reading Miss Manners column."

"My subscription hasn't been forwarded yet."

She laughed and he wanted to kiss her. That was a normal reaction to the conversation, right? Maybe. He didn't care, really.

He leaned in, one hand resting on the back of the couch, the other sliding up her side, a practiced move from more than 15 years ago that she reacted to instantly by tensing up for a split second before putting her arms around his neck, at that he pressed his lips to hers. Soft and steady, she didn't lick into him the way she used to. She was more passive now, her hands playing at the back of his neck the only cue he could quantify. It was then that he realized he was practically on top of her, on the old, scratchy couch with new scratchy afghan. He pulled back and she followed. Kneeling on the couch now to reach him, he sat back, planting his feet on the floor but she didn't move to straddle him. Instead, she stayed on her knees by his side while he ran his hands up and down her back. They kissed like that for a while, lazily, remembering the rhythm, showing off new tricks that years of experience brought.

"Hopper," she said in between kisses. "Hop," she said, and he wasn't sure if that was a moan or a plea. "Jimmy," she said, pushing on his chest barely.

"What? Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

He wasn't sure anyone besides his mother had called him Jimmy in at least 15 years.

"I'm not going to do this," she said, her thumb lazily running along his jaw, brushing the stubble tenderly.

"Pretty sure we just were."

"It won't make you feel better," she breathed out, sitting back on her haunches.

"The fuck it won't."

"It won't."

"Did you try it?" The missile found its target and her face changed.

"None of your goddamned business," she scolded, before standing up and heading towards the door.

"I didn't-" Hopper wanted to take it back. It was too far and he knew

it.

Joyce stopped, her hand on the doorknob, she might have been waiting for him to finish his half assed, unformed apology, or maybe she was plotting his death. Could be either or with her.

“The thing about Lonnie,” she whispered. “He got under my skin, he made me crazy, but he never...he never knew where to stab me to make it bleed the most. Because he never paid attention enough to care.”

The implication hung there a minute. Hopper felt that grief and anger simmering and added to the mix, a whole new layer of guilt. Over something from years ago. Welling up and coating his insides. She was right. He was mean. And he knew exactly where to strike. But she was mean too. Joyce knew what to say to set him off.

“This isn’t something,” she started, turning back to him, taking another step closer, he felt the need to stand up and meet her halfway.

“What?” he asked, urging her to continue.

She looked up at him, somber.

“This isn’t something that’s good for either of us. And I’ve got too much to worry about to add one more thing. You’re a mess, I’m a mess.... Let’s not.” Joyce pushed up on her toes and kissed his cheek, smiling fondly when she pulled away. “See you around, Hop.”

And that was that. She saw herself out while he pulled another cigarette from the pack on the counter. He plopped himself down on the couch and looked out the window at the stars feeling empty and alone as ever.

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**1980**

Joyce hadn’t noticed he’d come in. The lunch rush was just dying down, people grabbing things on their breaks. But once she’d checked out those folks, she saw him walking the aisles looking for this or

that. By the time he made it up to her register she felt prepared enough to talk to him.

How sad was it that someone she'd known most of her life put her on edge enough that she had to work up to speaking to them like a regular person? Maybe her anxiety was getting worse. She filed that away for later. No time or cash to see her doctor right now. Hopper just dug up all those old feelings.

He dumped a few rolls of packing tape on the counter.

"Find everything okay?" she asked, automatically. "Get enough tape?"

"Yeah," he said, looking over her shoulder at the cigarettes.

"How are you handling that?" she asked, gently.

"Starting to think there's something wrong with me." The statement was light but she was sure it was loaded.

"You know, you're kind of like Pig Pen," Joyce offered.

Hopper gave her his full attention now and he smiled. Joyce knew that most people in this town didn't pay attention to her anymore. She was different from who she was in high school, when she was well liked. People used to say she was funny. She hadn't even remembered that about herself until Hopper smiled at her comment. He was genuinely delighted, which seemed odd for both his typical demeanor and for the sentiment. But she liked it.

"From Charlie Brown?" he asked for clarification. "I can't even be Charlie Brown, all gloom and doom, you got me as the kid that doesn't shower?"

"I've got reason," she said. "All this bad stuff just seems to follow you around, like a cloud hanging over you"

"Like Pig Pen."

"Yes."

“Couldn’t have gone with some other metaphor?” He tilted his head, but he was still grinning at her. “Some other way to basically say I’m cursed.”

Joyce shrugged. “The boys watched *The Great Pumpkin* the other day, sorry, that’s my frame of reference.”

This time he laughed.

“Thanks for coming out,” he said, coming back around to his mother’s recent funeral.

“It was a lovely service. I didn’t send flowers, well, for obvious reasons,” she added.

He nodded. “Thanks for coming anyway.”

“I loved your mom. I wanted to be there.” Joyce paused, unsure if she should bring it up but decided to go for it. “I noticed, uh, Diane there? That’s her name, right?”

“Yeah, everyone loved Mom, including my ex wife.”

“Didn’t look like a happy reunion from where I stood,” she said.

“Well, it was a funeral, Joyce,” he stated, matter-of-factly.

Joyce rolled her eyes at him and he hemmed and hawed a second before going on.

“She uh, she wanted to let me know, personally, that she’s...she’s remarrying.”

“Oh.” Joyce felt guilt wash over her from her own altercation with him. But then...she was making this about her when it definitely wasn’t.

He shook his head as if he knew what she was thinking.

“I’m sorry.” And she really meant it. Maybe his comment was more apt, maybe he was cursed.

He pulled his wallet from the back pocket of his pants. "A pack of Marlboros too, please," he asked as she finished bagging up the tape.

"You know, you should call Patty Livingston. She has a little estate sale business."

"Mom doesn't," he paused and then corrected himself, "Didn't have anything of value, I'm just gonna pack it up and donate it to the Goodwill."

"You wouldn't have to do that. She comes in with her folks, they go through the stuff, decide what can be sold, box it all up, donate the rest. You'd get out of boxing the shit up and I'm sure she'd make enough to cover her fees. You might even get a little extra."

"Patty Livingston, huh? Redhead?"

"Yeah, Hop," she said, giving him a sidelong glance. "I'm sure she'd enjoy one of your evenings of entertainment too."

"Evenings of entertainment?" he said, punctuating it with a laugh. "You sound like a horrified southern belle."

"Does it make you feel better?" she asked, genuinely concerned.

She could have just said, "Whatever floats your boat." She almost did, but she'd heard the way he'd been all over town. He might even think she was jealous but that was the furthest thing from her mind. She'd warned him it wouldn't fill the void and she really just wondered if he'd try to fill the void with other things. He was a walking disaster, a real life Pig Pen. Something horrible could happen to him at any moment.

He tilted his head, studying her. "Hasn't yet. But, still plenty of fish in the sea. Maybe Patty will be the one to make it feel better."

Joyce shook her head. "You're disgusting."

"We'll never know if you would-"

"Don't finish that sentence," she said firmly, but she gave him a half smile.



“Shit,” Hopper said, snapping his fingers. “Flo needed staples.”

“Aisle seven,” Joyce said.

“Be right back.”

As soon as Hopper walked away, Joyce heard the clatter of the A-frame sign outside being knocked over. Sometimes people bumped into, tripped over it, but the sound wasn't like that. It was louder. She looked out to see a man on top of the sign, trying to get up. Once the man had gotten up, Joyce groaned. He fought with the door, like he fought with everything in life, trying to pull when the door opened with a push.

“Joyce!” Lonnie shouted as soon as he got the door open. “Joyce, where are my boys? You have to let me see them! A judge said so!”

Mortified, Joyce stepped around the counter, looking around to see that there were only a few customers in the store and the only ones concerned were the ones up front, like poor Mrs. Wilkins staring wide eyed.

“Lonnie, go outside. You're making a scene.”

He latched onto her arm and started to squeeze. Now that he was close, she could smell the liquor coming off him.

“You're hurting me, let go,” she whispered, firmly.

He barely let go but he kept screaming. “Where are the boys? It's my day!”

“Your day was Saturday, it's Tuesday. The boys are in school,” she explained as if he were a child himself.

“It's Saturday! You can't trick me. Let me see them.”

“Lonnie, they'd love to see you but it's Tuesday. They're in school. You can't see them today.”

“You're ruining them!” he shouted, and it didn't matter if he was drunk, it didn't matter if objectively she knew he didn't know shit,

but it threatened to knock the wind out of her.

“You have to leave,” she said, her tone changing.

Instead of letting him put a chink in her armor, she buckled down. “Get in your car, take a nap, and then go back to the city. Come back on Saturday. I know it’s not technically your day this weekend but the boys would love to see you. On Saturday.”

“I’m gonna go down to that school and get them! They’re my kids. That school is gonna give them to me and I’m gonna take them to the batting cages.”

“Hawkins doesn’t have batting cages, Lonnie.”

“I’m taking them to the city! With me! They want to live with me anyway! I heard them say it!”

“Will doesn’t even know you, you’ve been in and out so much.” She stopped. There was no point in her saying these things. He wouldn’t remember.

“Going to their school. If I leave here without your help, I’m going to their school!”

“They’re not even at the same school, Lonnie!”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Suddenly, Hopper was in between the two of them, shielding her and pushing Lonnie back two steps. “You wanna sleep this off in the drunk tank, man?”

“Well if it isn’t big, bad, Chief Hopper. You got your knight in shining armor now, huh?” Lonnie taunted Joyce.

Hop’s arms were wide, but Lonnie was trying to get around them. With that remark though, Joyce ran under Hop’s arms and shoved Lonnie away with all her strength. He staggered back but didn’t fall.

“Get out!” she shouted so loud and shrill that it hurt her own ears. She shrunk a little but Lonnie got the point.

“I’m coming back next Saturday but I’m telling my lawyer about

this!”

“Sure, great,” Joyce said, flatly, turning around to walk past Hopper.

She noticed all the eyes on her, the five people in the store, the small crowd of employees from the breakroom were out now, congregating and whispering at each other.

“Did you get Flo’s staples?” she asked, hoping she could get Hopper out of the store and then clock out for a smoke break.

It was hard enough to compose herself but she could keep her shit in a pile for a few more minutes. Then she could go out back and fall apart.

“Got ‘em.” He tossed them on the counter. “I can still put him in the drunk tank.”

“Don’t.”

“He do that a lot?”

“You’ve been here a year, this is the first time.”

“Ever?”

“Six dollars and 75 cents.” Ignoring his question was going fine.

His eyes were on the beat up truck outside that Lonnie was smoking against, shouting occasionally at birds.

“You think maybe he’s high?” he asked, handing her a ten.

“Hell if I know, don’t start a fight Hop,” she pleaded. “I know you’ve wanted to fight him since tenth grade but-”

“Coulda kicked his ass in second grade but Morris Greg did it first.”

Joyce sighed. Men were all idiots. All of them. She had one parenting goal and it was to survive and give the boys what they needed. But dammit, she had a new goal: try to raise them not to be idiots.

“You know what, on second thought, if your feud goes back that

long, do whatever you want. The two of you can punch each other until you break. Just do it outside the store. I need this job."

"Maybe he'll actually drive away. I can get him for drunk driving then."

"He'll be fine," Joyce muttered.

"He's gonna run into a building."

"Don't say that," she scolded. "I don't wish him dead."

"But your boys would get that social security money." He made a face like he was so clever and Joyce felt her mood swing again because she almost laughed at the statement.

"You're going to hell for that kind of talk."

"I've already been to hell," he said, with a shrug. "It's not that bad."

She handed him his bag. "I put Patty's number on the back of the receipt."

"Thanks," he said, absently.

She wasn't sure he even heard what she'd said. His gaze had shifted back to Lonnie in the parking lot. But she didn't care. As soon as she was done she made a beeline for the back room. She needed a cigarette and a corner to cry in.

The break room wasn't empty so she pushed through the backdoor and flexed her hands a couple of times before lighting her cigarette. She scrubbed her face and gave up holding back her tears. Frustration, embarrassment, panic, and anger all rushed through her, making her muscles feel stiff and her hands shake more than before, no matter how many times she balled them into fists.

"You okay?" Hopper's voice startled her and she hated that he was here, that he would see this part of her.

People talked and she tried to keep this out of the gossip mill, but it was a small town.

"Fine," she said, with fake enthusiasm, turning more to the wall she'd been leaning against, wishing she could just merge into it and hide.

"Don't look fine." But it didn't sound like he moved closer to her.

"You'd know, I guess. You've spent the last year being not fine and trying to convince people otherwise."

It was mean. It was hitting him where he hurt. But that was why they weren't good to each other. They could flirt when talking about grief and funerals but then they'd pour salt in old wounds.

"Remember how you said that he doesn't know where to stab to make you bleed the most?"

She did remember. Another time where they'd both come out swinging at each other instead of the forces that knocked them down.

"It's not true. You're just fighting so hard you don't even feel it. You're bleeding all over the place."

"Yeah, Lonnie's so insightful," she laughed bitterly and finally turned to him, deciding she didn't care if he saw her blotchy face and her frustration. "He comes after my kids. Everyone hurts when you come after their kids. Like I said, you spent the last year being torn to shreds over it. It's nothing special."

Hopper's lip curled in anger and his jaw ticked. "Don't," he ground out. "Just, stop for one goddamn minute. Don't get mad at me, he's the problem."

Joyce scoffed and put her face in her hands. "I've got plenty of problems, there's room for you to be one, too."

"I thought there wasn't room for me to be one. Isn't that what you said?"

She wanted him to walk away. She wanted to be left to fall apart and pull herself back together but he was making that impossible so she'd say what she had to say to get him to leave.

"You're taking up space anyway, I guess. Lucky me. Surrounded by

assholes.”

“I’m gonna go arrest that fucker.”

She wasn’t sure how he was getting from point A to point B with his logic but it was exhausting trying to follow it.

“Way to get back at me for saying something to you,” she snapped. “Arrest my deadbeat ex. Good plan. Top notch police work.”

“I was *trying* to be nice!”

“I don’t need you to be nice to me!” Joyce shouted back. “Especially when your version of being ‘nice’ means revelling in a personal vendetta that has little to do with me.”

Hopper’s face got all squinty and he put his hands on his hips.

“Fuck it,” he growled. “I’m going back to work. If he sticks around here too long, someone is bringing him in. Thanks for what’s her name’s number.”

“Patty,” Joyce mumbled. “At least get her name right, and buy her dinner first for god’s sake.”

“You don’t get a say,” he threw over his shoulder as he left her alone in the back alley.

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## 1981

Benny slid the food across the table before he sat down across from Hopper. “So next week, we’re going fishing.”

“Can’t, I’m busy,” Hopper said, cutting into his steak.

“Getting drunk from Monday until Thursday is not busy.” Benny folded his massive arms across his chest.

“Nah, it is. I even had Flo put it on the calendar.”

“You used to like company when you got drunk on your birthday.”

“My birthday didn’t used to come three days before-”

“I know,” Benny cut in. “But you can’t just spend the rest of your life ignoring an entire week in May. Let’s go fishing. We’ll get drunk together, everybody wants to come. Dave has a new camper, it’s got a damn barbeque that pulls down the side of it, he won’t stop talking about it so we’re all gonna go out and we’re gonna fish.”

“You guys have fun,” Hopper said before putting a fork full of potatoes in his mouth.

Benny glared at him. “Remember your eighteenth birthday?”

Hopper nodded, shoveling more food in his mouth as an excuse to slow the conversation down. He wasn’t going to go camping and fishing, no matter how hard his friend tried to convince him.

“It was the first time I ever hung out with you. I’d seen you at school, you and Joyce, meandering down the halls of Hawkins High like you owned the place. God, you two were so fuckin’ cool.”

“Flattery isn’t going to work,” Hop mumbled out around a mouthful of food.

Benny looked around to see if anyone else would hear him, Hopper wasn’t sure why, the place was empty, it was starting to rain outside, and the diner would close in a few minutes. The two of them were the only people there.

He leaned in and lowered his voice. “Joyce always had her skirt pulled up, how’s a girl that short have legs for days?”

Hopper rolled his eyes. “Don’t be a perv. She wasn’t hiking her skirt up for your benefit, or mine, she wanted to wear pants.”

“You’re telling me she was in detention every other week because she wanted to wear pants?” Benny raised an eyebrow.

Hopper snorted. “Yeah man, every time she’d get a demerit for her skirt, she’d tell the principal all about how women ought to be wearing pants to school, it was cold outside and she could move faster in pants, and all about how in Indianapolis the schools were

letting girls wear pants.”

“She never once struck me as a women’s libber,” Benny said, shaking his head and smiling. “Doesn’t even have an ERA sticker on her car.”

Hopper shrugged.

“Hey, hey Jonathan, your mom’s a feminist, ya know that?” Benny called out.

Hopper was surprised to see a scrawny teenager pop out of the kitchen, mop in hand. He recognized the kid as one of Joyce’s. Now he understood why Benny lowered his voice earlier.

“I don’t think she is,” Jonathan mumbled.

“Well alright, bud, get back to work then.” Benny gave him a half salute.

“What’s he doing here?” Hopper asked.

“Oh, he’s saving up for a car so he’s bussing tables, cleaning up for me.” Benny stood up and turned the sign on the door from OPEN to CLOSED. “Joyce used to be a little rebel, huh? She’s different now.”

“How so?” Hopper said, cutting another piece of his steak.

He didn’t think Joyce was all that different then.

“Well, for one she always looks tired.”

“I’d imagine she *is* tired, Benny.” Hopper gave him a look.

“She used to be louder,” Benny offered, walking back to the table. “Seems so timid now.”

Now Hop looked around to make sure the kid wasn’t in earshot. “I suspect that’s Lonnie’s doing.”

“You think he hit her?” Benny asked, leaning in.

“She’d never tell me if he did. Doesn’t matter though, not now.”



Hopper hated even considering it but he had. Lonnie was an aggressive piece of shit. In school, now, men like that... Then again, Hopper could never be sure on his read of Lonnie. Too many years of generally hating his guts.

Benny sat back, stroking his beard. "She used to be funny as hell."

Hopper smiled. "What do you mean used to be?"

"Eh, she's a nervous wreck now all the time."

Hopper tsked and Benny turned to see Jonathan wiping down the windows.

"How about I make you and your mom and your little brother some burgers, huh, Jonathan? Take 'em home and give your mom the night off cooking?" Benny asked.

Jonathan turned sheepishly. "Yeah, that'd be cool."

"Alright, you finish that up while I make those burgers, and make sure you take the trash out. I know it's raining, but pick up is tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," Jonathan said.

"She's gonna wanna pay you for those," Hopper said as Benny walked back to the kitchen. "You're gonna get a whole lecture about her not being a charity case."

Jonathan stared at Hopper. His face told Hopper his assumption was right.

"Too bad, I'm giving her these burgers." Benny pointed at Hopper with the spatula he was using to put the burgers on.

"If she gives you trouble, just tell her I paid for 'em," Hopper told Jonathan. "That'll probably make her madder, but she can yell at me instead of Benny that way. Benny doesn't know what it's like to be yelled at by your mom."

Jonathan gulped. Hopper thought he might say something, but he

didn't.

"You and I know what that's like, yeah? She's a tiny spitfire."

The kid cracked a smile and nodded. "I didn't even know she knew you, but she's yelled at you?"

Hopper grinned. "So many times."

"So many times what?" Joyce said as she walked through the door. Her hair was sticking to her face, her clothes were half soaked.

"Sorry I'm dripping on your floor, Benny!" she said towards the kitchen. "It's nasty out there, I figured I'd pick Jonathan up instead of having him catch a cold."

"Mom, did you burn your bras?" Jonathan asked, eagerly.

"What?" Joyce gave Hopper a look of disgust. She lowered her voice and got closer to Jonathan, she didn't want Hopper to hear. "No, bras are expensive."

"Chief Hopper said-"

"Chief Hopper said what exactly?" Joyce turned on him and narrowed her eyes.

He held up his arms in surrender and heard Benny laughing from the kitchen.

"I didn't say anything!"

"Yeah, sure. Telling my teenager some tall tales from high school, Hop?" She pressed her lips together and glared.

"It was just the pants thing," he defended.

"Jesus, I want my boys to be good kids, not shitty ones like we were." Joyce shook her head.

"He's a good kid," Benny added from the kitchen. "Definitely not like

you or Hop in school. But he's a good kid about to take out the trash, right?"

Jonathan nodded and took off towards the back with his rag and window cleaner still in hand.

Hopper leaned back in his chair and gestured for Joyce to sit in the spot vacated by Benny earlier. "He's making you some burgers. Gonna pack 'em up so you can take them home. My treat."

Joyce sat but she glared again. "I don't want your charity."

"I'm certain that at some point in the last 20 years I've owed you dinner so take it."

She huffed a minute like he was putting her out a great deal, but then she she muttered, "Fine."

He took her in, sopping wet, the lines of her face looking a little deeper than the last time he saw her, but still, he saw the girl from school who told dick jokes and hiked her skirt up in the name of pants.

"Are we different from who we were in high school?" Hop asked her.

"We're older," she said, with a little sigh.

"Yeah, but," he stopped, thinking of Benny's comments about Joyce being different.

The thing was, Hopper didn't notice her being different at all. She was funny when he talked to her, she was feisty, she stood up for herself if she needed to, which, when the two of them talked, it usually devolved into some disagreement where they came at each other with barbs and she never backed down from it.

Did other people not see that part of Joyce anymore? Was it reserved for him, special, or was it just that nobody else even bothered? It sure seemed like her boys got her, the her he knew, though. And for that, Hopper was glad. Being yourself with your kids, your family, that was something he missed.

“You got fat,” Joyce said, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“Come on,” he said, putting his hands up, offended.

But Joyce laughed. She smiled wide and threw her head back at the way he reacted. She didn’t cover her mouth to quell the laughter, she joyfully let the sound dance around the room. It made him smile despite being the butt of the joke.

“Okay, you filled out,” she amended when she’d stopped laughing.

“You know I don’t have a problem, plenty of women in this town,” he started, but she leaned across the table and put two fingers against his lips to shush him.

“Nobody wants to hear about it, be a gentleman for Christ’s sake.” But there was no sting in her words.

She sat back and caught sight of his hat on the end of the table. “And you’re losing your hair.”

He immediately reached for his forehead and covered his newly receding hairline.

“I defended you!” Hopper said, trying to get some relief from her teasing.

“From who?”

“Benny said you were different now,” Hopper answered. “But to be fair, that could just be because he really liked your legs in school.”

“Thanks, Benny, sorry I’m not giving out the free shows anymore,” she said.

Benny laughed. “It was a long time ago, 15 year old me was a dog, sorry you had to hear about it.”

“My delicate sensibilities are intact, don’t worry.” Joyce winked at him.

“Hey,” Benny added. “Tell Hop he should come fishing with us next

week.”

Joyce looked over at him, her eyes soft.

“Next week is a bad week for him,” she said without any prompting, not even turning to respond to Benny. “But I hear the first week of June is beautiful out at Jones River.”

Hopper gave her a nod and a relieved half smile. “That sounds like a really good time to go, Benny.”

“Happy Birthday,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“You need someone to drive you to the cemetery? Can’t drive yourself.”

He shook his head. “I don’t do that. Haven’t been able...”

“I’m not judging, just wanted to offer in case that was something you did,” she whispered, putting her hand on the table close to where his was.

He tried to go once, the first year. His mother had driven him, which is likely how Joyce knew. But it wasn’t right. Diane wasn’t with him and it felt wrong to be without her.

“Okay, all done,” Jonathan said, coming in from the back.

Joyce jumped up quickly from the seat, as if it was suddenly on fire. She dug in her pocket for her keys before pushing some wet hair off her face.

“Good, I’ve got these all done and you guys can head home. Where’s the little one?” Benny asked, bringing around a sack of food and handing it to Jonathan.

“Oh, he’s at the Wheeler’s, I’m picking him up on the way home.” She touched every key on her ring with her index finger while she spoke and she wouldn’t look back at him.

“Night, boys,” she said. “And thanks for the burgers.”

When she’d left, Benny looked at him.

“What?” Hopper asked.

“Guess you might be right, she hasn’t changed too much. But I wonder if that’s just something special that you get.” Benny grabbed a rag off the table next to him.

“Shut up.”

But on his drive home, he couldn’t stop thinking about that exact thing.

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### **November 11th, 1983**

“The night that Benny died, Earl said he saw some kid with a shaved head with Benny.” Hopper moved from the kitchen table to the couch with purpose, Joyce got up and followed him. “Now, I pressed him, he said it might be Will, but maybe...”

“Wait,” Joyce said, a strange flutter of hope igniting in her. “Maybe, it wasn’t?”

“Look.” He showed her the articles from the library. “This woman, Terry Ives, she claims to have lost her daughter, Jane. She sued Brenner, she sued the government. Now, the claims came to nothing, but what if, I mean, what if this whole time I’ve been... I’ve been looking for Will...I’ve been chasing after some other kid?”

-

It had been hours. He’d gotten to Joyce’s house mid afternoon, checking all the bulbs had taken another hour, they’d covered everything he saw at Hawkins Lab, that had taken them late into the night, (and a whole pack of cigarettes between them.) Then finally around 12:30 they’d put it altogether.

They needed to talk to Terry Ives.

From the articles, they could track her to Jonesboro, that would be easy, just a half hour drive. But they obviously couldn't do anything about it tonight. It was late and they already risked looking crazy asking to speak to her over newspaper clippings from 12 years ago.

Once they'd finalized their game plan, there wasn't much to be done. This was the best lead they could hope for at this point and things were starting to look a little more attainable. Hopper fell back against the couch feeling optimistic. His body was tired though, he was exhausted but probably not as exhausted as Joyce. He'd slept since this all started. She hadn't. Not much he expected.

He turned to see her on the other end of the couch, her knees tucked underneath her, reading over the last bit of the articles he'd found about Terry Ives. Hopper expected her to look tired, like he felt, but for the first time in days, she looked almost relaxed. She'd obviously gotten cleaned up for the funeral this morning, that seemed like years ago instead of hours. Of course, he'd missed the sham of a service.

He glanced around the living room, taking in the lights and mess. When this was all over, when they'd found Will, he'd come back and help her clean this up. She shouldn't have to do it herself. The upturned laundry basket, the bulbs everywhere from his bug hunt, the boarded up wall...

"Wait, who boarded this up?" Hopper asked, gesturing to the front wall.

"Just Lonnie," she said, absently, not even looking up from the last article.

Hopper's countenance changed, the lightness and optimism of the last few minutes replaced by the deep frown his face usually held.

"What the fuck was he doing here, why... Wait, he's gone already?!"

That guy had some balls, showing up for what? The funeral? Then leaving Joyce again, with everything that had happened, what a piece of work.

Still, Joyce wasn't even fazed. She finally looked up at him, her head

cocked to the side.

"I threw him out, calm down." She waved her hand as if that settled everything.

"What happened?" Hop asked, more concerned now.

"I took care of it." Something in her face told him it wasn't a small task but she wasn't upset or resigned, she seemed relieved. "You don't need more reason to hate him."

"Got enough of those from the way he's treated you the last twenty years," he said, irritation lacing his tone. "A few more won't change much."

Joyce laughed. A smile went all the way up to the crow's feet at her eyes, he felt lighter instantly seeing it. "You're a goddamned flirt. But your lines don't work on me, you know that."

"They worked before," he reminded her.

"We're not 17 anymore. And some of us are wiser in our old age."

He gave her a small smile in return and watched as her face slipped back, he could see the instant she snapped back to cold reality. He didn't want her to so he tried to stretch the moment.

"It's not a line," he said, looking away so she'd listen. If he didn't charm her with his eyes, she might believe him.

"Stop," she breathed out. "I own my shit choices and I've survived just fine."

"I know," he said, with a nod of his head. "But I can still hate him. And I have other reasons, hell, you've called me on that shit. I just said-"

"Doesn't matter."

Joyce didn't want to talk about it anymore. He knew by the way she moved closer to him on the couch, brazenly taking his hand, lacing her fingers through his. She laid her head on his shoulder like she



used to.

All that got him to stop talking. They knew where to come at each other to hurt, it hadn't occurred to him in a while that she knew how to get him to shut up using touch, too.

It was short lived though. She sat up and pulled away mere seconds after curling into him.

"You smell awful," Joyce said, making a face.

"I've been in these clothes for two days. The things I've seen, you should know, I could smell much worse."

She shook her head and scoffed, but he could see her trying to hold back a laugh.

"You can go home and shower and change," she suggested.

But he didn't want to go home. His house was torn apart, his phone was broken (never mind that he'd broken it himself,) all that and he didn't want to leave her. Knowing that there might be a monster on the loose, that there was a very real government agency hovering over them. If they'd bugged his house but not hers, they might have been watching it, waiting for him to leave. He just couldn't be sure.

"Nah, I want to stay here," he said. "It's only a few more hours until light anyway, we can get on the road earlier if we're together."

Telling her about all the things that could potentially kill them didn't seem like a good idea so he played it safe.

Joyce considered him a minute and he thought she might send him away. Insisting on her ability to stay safe on her own, if she could see through his excuse that well. But instead she took an exaggerated sniff and made a disgusted face.

"You can stay but you've got to shower and I'm gonna wash those clothes." She was teasing him in the midst of all this.

"I've been here all day, you're just now noticing?" he asked, mock offended.

"It's the first time I haven't had a cigarette in my hand all day to mask the smell, but no, you definitely smell putrid."

"That's harsh," he said. "Besides, this all seems like an elaborate plan to get me naked on your couch, Joyce."

He might have batted his eyelashes at her. It was habit though, he couldn't help himself.

"No one needs a plan to get you naked," she deadpanned. "You're very easy."

Hopper clutched invisible pearls. "Joyce, how dare you suggest such a thing?"

She swatted at his shoulder. "Quit it. Look, the dog won't even come near you. Go shower, toss your clothes out and I'll wash them. There's towels under the sink."

"Alright," he said, standing up. "I'll just be a few minutes."

"I think I'll manage without you," she said, flippant.

Again, he didn't think he should worry her with all the reasons she should be concerned. She had more than enough on her plate to worry about and she was almost relaxed so he figured keeping her in the dark was more of a blessing than a lie of omission.

He touched her shoulder as he walked by and she put her hand over his for a brief second. While he showered, he realized that he'd touched her more over the last few days. Of course, he'd been with her more than usual. In all his years since he'd come home, he definitely hadn't seen Joyce this often, in this short span of time. What would that look like when they found Will? Would they go back to their separate corners of town where they barely saw one another? Why was he even wondering about it? This wasn't the time.

When he emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his middle, he found Joyce in the kitchen.

"It's the middle of the night, what could you possibly be cooking?"

Joyce startled, and something fell from her hands and clattered on the floor.

“Shit,” she said, bending over to pick up what she’d dropped.

Her hand was balled in an awkward fist. When he came closer, he saw she had been opening a can of Spaghetti O’s.

“You scared me and I sliced my hand on the top of the can,” Joyce said, waving her fist as he came up behind her. “It’s fine though, this is why Jonathan makes fun of me. He knows I’m a terrible cook.”

“You’re making Spaghetti O’s at one in the morning?” he said, taking her hand to examine it.

It wasn’t a deep cut, it was in that space on the outside of her palm, in between her thumb and pointer, but he leaned over her and turned on the sink. She quickly put her hand under the water.

“I realized I was actually hungry. I haven’t felt hungry in days and I thought I should eat.” She hissed as more water ran over her hand.

Hopper pulled her hand out, turned off the water, and then examined it again. With her other hand, Joyce pointed to the top of the fridge.

“There’s band aids up there.”

He easily reached over and grabbed the box, barely taking a step towards the fridge. Pulling one out, he unwrapped it and looked again at her hand, running his thumb across the inside of her palm to reassure her. Or that’s what he told himself. Not that he liked the feel of her skin or the way she barely hissed again.

“You’ll survive this, we won’t have to amputate your hand or anything.”

Joyce huffed at him, annoyed. “I could put the band aid on myself if you gave me my hand back.”

“I got it, I got it,” he said, giving her a look.

Since they’d rinsed it, it still hadn’t clotted, so he put the cut to his

mouth and sucked the little bit of blood off her hand to clear it so he could see where to put the bandage, then swiftly put the band aid on so it could clot. Her breath hitched, and he saw her lips part.

Joyce pulled her hand back as soon as the band aid was on her and turned from him quickly. Messing with the can and her pot on the stove. It's not like he meant it but he was naked in her kitchen and she was bleeding and it was a really odd turn of events. But in the context of the week they'd both had, a moment of sexually charged bandaging was probably the most predictable thing between them.

"You ever," he started, knowing this could take a nasty turn knowing how the two of them operated. "You ever date, after Lonnie, I mean?"

"Will's been missing for four days and you wanna talk about my love life, Hop?" She didn't turn to him and that was probably better, maybe she'd smack him with the wooden spoon she was stirring with.

"I thought it'd be less depressing," he said, with a snort.

Joyce let out a small laugh. "I'm not you. I'm not unhappy, I *wanted* to get divorced, and I don't have a gaping chest wound that needs to be filled. So no, I haven't had time nor the inclination, to date."

She pulled the Spaghetti O's off the stove and dumped some in a bowl.

"You're welcome to them if you want," she said, as she passed without looking at him, to sit down at the table.

He wasn't hungry so instead he sat, as carefully as he could, in the towel. He felt his back, still damp from the shower, stick to the back of the chair.

"You're happy?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Hopper had never told her he didn't want to get divorced. She just knew. They were good at reading each other, but she was better than him. He never pegged her for being happy. But filling gaping chest wounds with one night stands, well, she'd had his number for years.

From the very first time he tried to do it with her.

“I said I wasn’t *unhappy*,” she corrected him, stirring her bowl before popping open her Diet Coke. “Why are you trying to have this deep heart to heart? In the last four years, at any point has one of these conversations ended with us in a good place?”

“No, guess it hasn’t,” he admitted.

“Then let me eat my Spaghetti O’s.” It wasn’t harsh or sharp, just matter-of-fact, an exhausted request.

He nodded his head in understanding and pulled a cigarette from the pack on the table.

Talking didn’t work out well for them. It always ended in fighting. Cruel words thrown out and at least from his spot, a month or so of being annoyed and off kilter because of the argument.

He smoked and she ate. The sound of the dryer spinning in the background would have put him to sleep if he hadn’t been caught up in Joyce’s words. She wasn’t unhappy. Of course, he assumed, when one of her kids wasn’t missing, circling death, possibly dead.

“You still crochet?” he asked.

She nodded.

“The shrink, Dr. Chase, did he suggest that? To quit smoking?”

Hopper saw the guy once a month to get his prescription, he’d done one session where he was given coping mechanisms. He told the doc, no thanks, and took his paper to the pharmacy. Never did go back for more therapy. Just the pills.

“Not to quit smoking, he said it would help the ‘downward spiral of negative thoughts,’” she said, emphasising the last words in her impression of Dr. Chase.

“It help?” He put out his cigarette and gave her his full attention.

“You thinking of taking up crochet?” she asked, with a half smile,

scrapping her bowl and putting the last bite in her mouth.

“No, I-” but he never finished his thought.

The dryer dinged, letting them know his clothes were done. He got dressed and ended up back on the couch. He wasn’t sure where Joyce had gone, maybe to bed, but she came in a few seconds later, bringing the dog in from outside.

Joyce started to turn off lights, the one in the kitchen, the one over the stove, the hallway light, he thought now she’d go to bed and he’d stay on the couch, so it surprised him when she joined him. She sat down, laid the back of her head on his thigh, and stretched out across the rest of the couch. A tiny thing like her was easily comfortable on two thirds of a full sized couch.

She looked up at him, her eyes watery. “Tell me we’re going to find him.”

In that moment he remembered how terrified he felt when he accepted Sarah’s prognosis. Not when the doctors told them, but days, weeks later, when he realized it was going to happen. The news crushed him.

There was a chance they’d find Will. He almost felt confident, they had a good lead, finding him, saving him, it felt just outside of their reach, but not too far. Not insurmountable. But it didn’t matter what he told her. She needed to rest. Surely, she was only asking him for this because she wanted to sleep and not feel guilty for it. Not feel enveloped by darkness.

Hopper swallowed past the lump in his throat and nodded. “Yeah, we’re gonna find him.”

Her body shook with a heavy breath, and then she shifted so her cheek was on his thigh and she was facing away from him. He rubbed her back with one hand, and taking his own deep breath, he leaned his head against the back of the couch and tried to sleep himself.

**December 31st, 1983**

Joyce pulled into the spot in front of the Wheelers' house and sat for a minute. She needed to work herself up for this. The heater in her car was unreliable at best but it seemed to be pumping out warm air for a minute which was good. Between Christmas and helping Jonathan with repairs on his own car, she couldn't afford to worry about fixing her heater right now. It would have to wait.

Karen had been practically begging her to come over for the last month. After everything that had happened, she'd dropped off a freezer full of casseroles, anytime the boys were hanging out at her house she'd call Joyce to let them know they got there okay. Karen had even brought Will home one night when the schedules couldn't be worked out for Jonathan or Joyce to pick him up.

Joyce had been a nervous wreck after she got Will back and Karen knew and understood it. She bent over backwards to help.

They hadn't necessarily been friends, per say. They went to school together and Hawkins was small, everyone knew everyone. But as their kids became good friends in second grade, their lives had always been connected in that way. Karen was always inviting her to stop by and have coffee, to go out to lunch, join her book club, things that Joyce never had time for.

So Joyce could do this tonight. All the boys were having a sleepover for New Year's Eve, Nancy and Steve were having a mini movie marathon and for some reason they'd invited Jonathan. (Joyce still had no idea what the dynamics were there but Jonathan went eagerly.) Since Jonathan's car was in the shop, Karen jumped on the opportunity to convince Joyce to stop by before midnight so they could have drinks and talk.

In general, socializing in situations like this made her nervous. She'd rather be at home where she felt most comfortable. No one had any expectations and she didn't have to imagine all the ways things could go wrong. Her hands never shook at home. (Last month being the exception.)

But Karen was her friend and she'd been so accommodating and

helpful. Joyce could do this for Karen. She'd stay for an hour and then she could take Jonathan home. Besides, Joyce hadn't celebrated New Year's out in ages. This would count as going out. It might even be fun.

Pulling down the visor to see the mirror, she put some lipstick on, to feel festive, and then she reached for her door handle, just as someone scared the shit out of her by knocking on the glass.

"Sorry," Hopper's voice was muffled until she opened the door.

"Are you trying to scare me to death?" she scolded him.

He laughed as he opened her door wider so she could get out. "I didn't think that was possible. Been through hell and back now, haven't you?"

She sighed while fixing her top and pulling her coat around her tighter. It wasn't snowing yet tonight but it might in a few hours.

"I'd rather not relive it, just like you don't like to relive yours."

"Kinda did a little, helping you."

He didn't get that pained look on his face that was typical when anyone mentioned Sarah in any vague or direct way. That was new. Instead, he had the barest hint of a smile as he shut her door for her.

"What are you doing out here? It's freezing."

He was wearing his uniform so he was obviously working but why he was right here in the cul de sac, that was worth asking about.

"The Smiths'," he said, pointing to the house across the street. "They're in New Mexico for Christmas. Last year when they were gone a bunch of kids broke into their basement and flooded it. So Norman asked me if we'd swing by and check on the house every night."

"That's a thing you can ask cops to do?" she asked.

"It is in Hawkins," he answered with a shrug. "Picking up the boys?"



She nodded. "Karen's been desperate to have me come over and 'let loose,' so tonight's the night. I guess. Whatever that means."

Hopper smiled, a full, wide smile. One she wasn't sure she'd seen in years.

"That's gonna be some party."

"Oh hush," she said.

"You're here!"

They both turned to see Karen coming down the walkway to meet them at the curb.

"I thought you might flake out again," she said, a little giggly. She'd definitely started the party before Joyce showed up.

"You flaked out before?" Hopper asked Joyce.

"She didn't come to my Tupperware party two weeks ago," Karen answered for her.

"Karen, you're the only one of those ladies that likes me." She turned to Hopper. "Those women all hate me."

"That's why I don't go to Tupperware parties either," he said, his smile lewd.

"They don't like you for obviously different reasons," Joyce replied, shaking her head.

He laughed, and something about his face was different. Something lighter about him, if she didn't know better, she'd think maybe he was actually content. They stood for longer than polite just kind of grinning at each other.

"Hopper, you come in, too." Karen interrupted.

Joyce flushed. She'd completely forgotten Karen was even standing there, but she recovered quickly enough.

“Hop’s working,” Joyce told Karen.

“Oh come on, what could possibly be going on right now?” Karen argued.

“A lot *could* be going on right now.” He looked around at the other houses. “But I could come in for a minute. If there’s something big, they’ll call.”

Karen swooped in then, she linked arms with Joyce practically pulling her up the walkway. She waved her hand over her shoulder.

“Come on, Hopper. We’re gonna make Ted pop another bottle of champagne!”

“Just how many glasses have you had?” Joyce asked, looking back at Hopper with mild amusement.

“Oh, I already finished the first bottle. But we’ve got two more and the kids are all in the basement. Even the teenagers. Steve convinced them a game of Risk would be more fun tonight.”

“And they all agreed?” Joyce asked.

“He had a compelling argument, I guess it worked. But they assured me that they’d be back to D&D when the teenagers left,” Karen explained. “They swore they’d play all night to finish it. Whatever it is.”

The house was warm and bright. They took off their coats and before they’d hung them up, Karen was back with two champagne flutes.

“Oh, no thank you, I know you want to party but I’ll just have a Diet Coke, if you have one? Or a water?”

“Jonathan can drive you home, Joyce,” Karen offered.

“He could, but I don’t drink very much anymore so I’m gonna skip it, but thank you.”

Hopper gave her an odd look, but Karen shrugged and threw back the glass. She shivered a little when she finished it and then gave them a

dopey look.

Joyce was enjoying this. Maybe she should watch Karen drink more often.

“Come on into the other room, Ted, turn off the TV.”

She led them into the living room just as Ted turned off the TV and sat up in the recliner. Joyce sat on the couch and Hop sat next to her, while Karen tried to prop herself on the side of the recliner. Ted looked at her confused but went with it.

“I didn’t know you were coming, Chief,” he said to Hopper.

“Just came in for a minute,” he replied, holding his champagne flute up. “Quick glass of champagne and then I’m back out to work.”

“Hopper was checking on the Smiths’ house again, right?” Karen asked, almost falling off the side of the chair.

Hopper nodded.

“Hey, why does everyone call you Hopper?” Ted asked. “Why doesn’t anybody call you Jim?”

Joyce felt a laugh bubble up inside her that she tried to stifle with a cough but then Karen started to laugh, too. She looked at Hopper to verify, and yes, he did remember. His lips were pressed together tight and she could tell he was trying to choose his words.

“In seventh grade, a kid named Jimmy Mahoney moved in.”

Karen made a sound like a high pitched hiccup which made it even more difficult for Joyce not to bust up laughing.

“Couldn’t be two of us so, people started calling me Hopper.”

Ted nodded his head as if the explanation was sufficient but Joyce took a deep breath. Hopper put his hand on her knee and squeezed it. Whether that was meant to stop her or encourage her, she had no idea.

“But why didn’t we call him ‘Mahoney?’” Joyce asked.

Hopper made his squinty face and she waited in anticipation of how he’d react. She could hear Karen trying to keep it together. It was like a mini staring contest, it felt like five minutes where he just stared at her but it was surely only a few seconds.

“Because... he was bigger than me.”

Joyce couldn’t help the mischievous grin that broke out across her face, she licked her lips and smiled wider. Hopper looked at her now like he wasn’t sure if she’d do it, like he was feeling the same giddy anticipation that she was.

“It’s only been 20 years,” she teased. Ted’s eternally perplexed face got a little more distinct. “I told you it was gonna be 35, didn’t I?”

“You did warn me. And we’re well within the statute of limitations.”

She felt like she was asking permission. It felt like he was giving it.

“Watch this,” Karen stage whispered to Ted.

Joyce scrunched her eyes closed for a second and then blurted it out.

“I’ve seen his dick and I’m here to tell you that you should get your name back.”

Karen fell off the chair. Both Joyce and Hopper broke eye contact to check on her but she was giggling like crazy. Ted laughed and reached over to help her up.

“Joyce used to tell that joke once a week back in high school,” Karen explained to Ted in between her giggles. “It’s never failed to make me laugh.”

“It’s a good story,” Ted added, as he helped Karen sit in the recliner now while he stood next to her.

Hopper took a drink of his champagne and Joyce noticed that his hand was still on her knee. She didn’t know how to take it, but she

didn't hate it. As if he could read her mind, he left it there and caught her eye so she knew it wasn't a subconscious gesture. His hand was on her, and he knew it. Joyce looked away, his gaze too intense for her.

"Mom," Mike said, rushing into the room and Joyce felt Hopper moved his hand discreetly to the couch cushion. "Is there anymore Pepsi?"

The kid made quite the face at the scene. Karen still giggling in the recliner, Ted standing over her looking entertained, whatever she and Hopper looked like.

"There's more in the fridge, sweetie," Karen managed to get out.

"Thanks," he said, bolting quickly.

"You know," Hopper started. "I should get going."

He downed the rest of his champagne and put the glass on the coffee table.

"I'm glad you could come in, even just for a bit," Karen said, ever the gracious host, even while intoxicated. "But it's just a few minutes before midnight, we've got poppers."

"I'll pass, but thanks," he said, standing up.

Joyce stood up, too and Hopper raised an eyebrow.

"I forgot something in my car, I'll be right back," she told Karen and Ted.

Hopper got his coat and hat but Joyce headed out without her coat, instead wrapping her arms around herself.

"It's 20 degrees out here, Joyce, even if you're just running to your car, you should have grabbed your coat," he said as they walked down the lawn.

"S'not that bad," she brushed him off.

She wasn't entirely sure why she'd come out here with him except she didn't really want him to leave. Of course, he had to, she knew that. Spending the rest of the night with Karen would be fun. It was worth the trip for that alone, but she couldn't fight the nagging feeling that she actually wanted Hopper to sit beside her all night. She liked spending time with him. When had that started and how long would it last?

They got to her car and he waited, expecting her to get whatever imaginary thing she'd used as an excuse to come out here. Thankfully, his radio crackled with a voice talking about someone's trees being toilet papered, giving her an out.

He pulled the brick of a radio from his coat pocket and responded. "Yeah, I'll head over there, Paul Revere and where? What's the cross street?"

He had a half smile on his face and he never broke eye contact with Joyce. It was unnerving and endearing at the same time, she felt her cheeks heat up despite the chill. What was he doing to her?

Just as he finished his radio conversation, the lights on the Wheeler's house flickered. Joyce felt her stomach drop for a half second. She turned and gulped.

"It's just the kids." Hopper pointed to the living room window.

The curtains were open and they could see Dustin and Lucas flipping the light switches and Nancy pulling poppers.

Joyce exhaled long, and looked at her watch. "It's midnight."

"Wild party in there."

"Yeah, thanks for coming in for a minute. It was nice," she said, proud of the way she didn't stumble over any of the words.

She wasn't sure she'd ever thanked him for anything. As in ever. So she took a step closer, stood on her tiptoes, and with her arms still wrapped tightly around herself for warmth, she kissed him.

“What was that for?” he asked, breathless, despite there being nothing to be excited about.

It was short and quick, not hot and heavy.

“Happy New Year,” Joyce said. “And also for believing me. Helping me find Will. All of that.”

“Oh come on, don’t i deserve some tongue for all that I did?” he asked, with a short laugh.

He was joking but she wanted to, she wanted to a lot. But she also wasn’t sure she wanted him to know that so she rolled her eyes, looked back at the house to make sure no one was watching, then said, “What time are you done tonight?”

“Two, figured I’d let the guys have a little more fun while I did the boring shit.”

He didn’t seem to catch onto what she was asking so she hesitated. She bit her lip and then went for it. Jonathan would be the only one home tonight and he usually fell asleep listening to some band that she wasn’t even sure knew how to play their instruments.

“There’s a spare key above the door frame, left side, the back door,” Joyce explained and Hopper’s smile fell into an open look of confusion. “You wake Jonathan and all bets are off.”

He sputtered for a second. “Are you-”

“Goodnight,” she interrupted him, rushing back to the house before he could say anything else.

Once she was back in the house, she leaned against the front door for a minute, taking a deep breath. What had she just done?

If he didn’t show up, she wasn’t going to worry about it. They hardly ever saw each other anyway, this wouldn’t be a mistake, at least not one they’d talk about. That was her new policy with him. Don’t talk about anything complicated. They couldn’t hurt each other if they didn’t talk about it.

She spent the next hour at Karen's fiddling with her keys. Touching every key in a methodical way. As she drove home with Jonathan almost falling asleep next to her (how was it that the 12 year olds were going strong and the teenagers were drooping?) she tapped her fingers against the steering wheel excessively.

When they got home, Jonathan didn't even head into the bathroom, he went straight for his room and slammed the door. Joyce looked around. The clock read 1:15. She had at least an hour before he'd show up. *If* he showed up.

She picked up some things in the living room, did the dishes, even folded a load of laundry. When she'd put that away in her room, she paced around. How should she look when he got here ( *if he got here* ), she wondered. She settled on her big sleep shirt, the one that would always fall off her shoulder and look very *Flashdance* . The clock read 2:00 so she flipped the light and turned on the lamp by her bed, then she slipped under the covers.

When she heard the knock at her door, she startled awake, she looked over at the clock and it was 2:30. She hadn't slept long but it was embarrassing how tired she was all the time. She scrubbed her face to wake herself up more.

"Come in," she called out, low, just in case.

The door opened and Hopper came in slowly. He turned to shut the door with as little sound as possible and then he turned back.

"Feel like a teenager sneaking in here," he said, but he looked almost as nervous as she felt. "Did you fall asleep? It's late. There was a car crash, just a fender bender but I went out and handled it so I left later than I was supposed to. Is it too late?"

His rambling was adorable and put her more at ease.

"I'm up now," she said, sitting up and giving him what she hoped was a coy smile.

She noticed he'd already come without his hat or coat or boots on, but he'd carried them all into the room with him. He bent over and



put them on the floor.

“Did Karen get more hammered the longer you were there?” he asked, standing a bit awkwardly at the foot of the bed.

“Yeah,” she answered with a laugh. “She finished all three bottles of champagne.”

“When’d you stop drinking?”

“A while ago. I don’t like the way it makes me feel.” It wasn’t a lie, more like a half truth, but telling him the real reason meant mentioning Lonnie and she wasn’t particularly sure she’d manage to get laid if she mentioned her ex husband in this moment.

He looked like he was filing that information away and she expected that he knew that wasn’t the whole story but he let it go.

Hopper stood uncomfortably glued to the floor at the foot of her bed. Joyce wasn’t sure how to proceed. If he didn’t want to, he wouldn’t have come, right? With that knowledge, she boldly sat up on her knees and made her way to the end of the bed. She moved more confidently when she saw the way he was looking her over. His mouth parted, he exhaled a little heavier, and he didn’t take his eyes off her. There wasn’t a doubt, he definitely wanted her.

“It’s been a few years since high school, but I think we can remember how this works,” she said.

She licked her lips and caught his gaze following her tongue. Hopper took a step closer and leaned down just barely, hesitating just centimeters from her mouth.

“I’ve learned a few tricks since then, I don’t fumble anymore,” he said, and she felt his breath on her face.

“As I recall, you did just fine back then.” She put her hands on his chest, fiddling with the button of his shirt. “I’ve got a couple of tricks myself.”

“Don’t tell me where you learned ‘em,” he said, putting his hand on her thigh and moving it up her side, like he always did, but this time,

under her sleep shirt.

Her breath hitched as his hand slid from her side to her back, he pulled her flush against him and she couldn't take it anymore. She kissed him.

The last time she'd kissed him, four years ago, he'd tasted faintly of beer and cigarettes. It was familiar. It's what he'd tasted like 20 years ago, too. This time she tasted mint, like he'd chewed a stick of Doublemint before he came out, for her benefit.

She was glad it was different.

She wanted it to be different from all the other times.

While she was licking into his mouth, she started to work the buttons on his shirt. He moved his hand from her back to his belt, before she was out of breath from the kiss, he was stripped down to his boxers.

"You're way too quick at getting naked," she teased, as he kissed along her neck.

"It's a skill everyone should have, really," he muttered against her skin.

"You're ridiculous," Joyce said, her hands playing at the back of his neck.

Gently he guided her down onto the bed, she sighed and closed her eyes, losing herself in the flood of sensations.

Before she'd gotten to this point, she was sure this would be a one time thing. It was New Year's Eve, they'd shared an insane experience of government conspiracies, wrapped up in panic and her grief at losing her child. This was just the closure she needed. Everything was falling into place, back to normal, no more monsters, or lights, or Upside Downs, or endless hours and days spent desperately waiting for Hopper to give her some kind of news.

What an idiotic thing to decide. How could she decide to do this only once when he was doing that thing with his tongue and she was lifting her hips off the bed trying to get closer to him?

Since Lonnie left for good, she hadn't dated. But that didn't mean she didn't get herself off with regular frequency. And she was very capable. A well timed orgasm could calm her anxiety or relieve stress. The part that was missing, that she was currently being reminded of, was the human connection.

She shimmied out of her panties while he slid his hand into them, his fingers playing at her clit.

"Slow down," he said, in between kisses, but she shook her head and hooked her leg over his back, pulling him closer.

The motion caught him off guard and he groaned, barely keeping himself from completely covering her. But she had the satisfaction of blessed friction for a second.

"Guess I won't have ask what you want," Hopper said, slipping a finger into her. "You're gonna let me know."

"Have I ever needed prompting?" Joyce asked, running her nails down his bicep.

"Never," he replied, laughing into the crook of her neck.

He got her off with his hand and as she came down from the high, he'd moved to her side, tenderly brushing hair of her face. Her muscles felt heavy and she could have easily fallen asleep, which Hopper was practically encouraging, the way he was touching her now. She stretched, putting her arms above her head, and pushing her toes out.

"You good?" he asked.

She nodded, lifting herself up just enough to pull her shirt over her head, and turning on her side now so they were facing each other. His breath caught and she could see him fighting an internal battle to keep his eyes on hers but also take in her body fully exposed. The reaction was endearing, if not a little silly considering.

"It's late, if you want to go to sleep-"

Joyce leaned in and kissed him to stop him from talking. Talking was

gonna be the thing that ruined this. It tainted everything they did.

She bit his lip and felt his dick twitch against her leg through the fabric of his underwear (which he still had on for some unknown reason) so she let her hand slide along his chest, down his stomach and then to his hip where she started to pull the briefs down.

This was all the encouragement he needed, his hand covered hers and he finished the job without breaking the kiss. She gripped him and he moaned into her mouth, eagerly.

“Condom?” Joyce asked, stroking him and enjoying the helpless sounds he made.

He rolled onto his back and flailed almost wildly looking for his wallet on the nightstand. She tried not to laugh at his desperation. He fumbled with his wallet and dug the packet out, ripping it open with his teeth. She moved enough for him to try to put it on but he struggled so she took over with a knowing smile.

“Don’t say anything,” he breathed out, a mix between embarrassment and arousal.

“Wasn’t gonna,” she said, sliding the condom down his dick.

He tried to turn back on his side but she stopped him, putting her hands on his shoulders and pushing him back down, lifting herself to straddle him. He groaned, reaching for her neck and guiding her down so he could kiss her. He was greedy and sloppy now. The tender touches of a few minutes ago lost to pawing hands and urgent lips.

When she slid down onto him they both shivered with the blissful relief that came from finally filling the need. His hands stilled, slowing to a glacial pace, pursuing slow tracks across her skin, from her back to her sides, barely skimming up her stomach to circle her breasts.

They found a rhythm and she, herself, almost forgot to be quiet. They weren’t the only ones in the house and she didn’t want to field any questions about this. She didn’t even know what they were doing so

she certainly didn't want to discuss it with her kids.

So she centered herself, leaning down again to kiss Hopper, feeding her sounds into him. His grip on her hips tightened and he started to thrust up into her. She lifted herself up again, bracing against his shoulders and met his pace, grinding down and relishing in her body's response.

It wasn't long before her toes were curling and her own pace quickened. He followed her easily, a few more strokes and he was spent, too.

She rolled off of him and they both lay breathing heavily but content.

Floating at the back of her mind was a vague notion of dread, but just as it threatened to get too close, Hopper spoke.

"Jesus, you're good at that."

She giggled, it felt foreign, but the euphoria pumping through her was worth it. "Just like riding a bike."

"I'm the bike and anytime you want to ride, I'm available, I might be comparing all other bike riders to you."

It was almost too honest. Almost a line. But he froze when he said it. Like he'd said too much. He'd revealed something he didn't intend to share.

She grinned, staring at the ceiling, and swatted his chest without looking. "Shut up."

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**May 1984**

No talking.

That was the unwritten rule. There were a few of these unwritten rules that they'd both been able to lay out and then adhere to, but no talking was the number one, the most important, the rule that didn't get broken.

In 20 years of knowing each other, the surest way for them to avoid hurting each other was to just not discuss anything important.

Not feelings. Not actions. Not dreams and futures, not pain, grief, or loneliness.

No talking.

Hopper and Joyce had cobbled together a relationship without saying one word about it and it was working pretty damn well from where he stood.

Unwritten rules that followed “no talking” consisted of not telling anyone what they were doing and acting as if nothing in their relationship had changed. That part was easy because nothing had changed, except, of course, they’d added sex to their volatile interactions. There was no way this would backfire.

(Hopper lived on the edge, every day, of recognizing that this could all backfire in a fire to rival the Great Chicago Fire, but if he didn’t think about it, it would just go away, surely, at some point, it was safe to keep ignoring it.)

The sex they’d had on New Year’s Eve was not, as he expected, a one time event. That time turned into Joyce pushing him up against the wall of the store break room one night when she was closing. It turned into eating her out on his desk at the station when he’d needed her to sign follow up paperwork for closing Will’s missing persons report. It happened a fair amount of times in her bed, in the middle of the night, with him sneaking in and out like a teenager so her boys weren’t aware of what was happening between the two of them. It happened at his house, on the couch, during a lunch break that went so long that Joyce refused to ever do lunch together again. It was just the once in his Bronco, they might have been fucking like teenagers but they were not actually teenagers anymore and sex in cars was absolutely reserved for idiot teenagers who didn’t have beds.

As much sex as they were having, it was an impressive feat that no one suspected and that they had managed to go this long without a knock down drag out fight. One that involved saying painful things. Poking at each other's old, scabbed over wounds.

Everything was fine.

Never mind that along with not talking about it, Hopper had made a personal goal to not *think* about it. They didn't need to talk about it. He didn't need to think about it.

If they never discussed any of this it could go on forever even, with no conflict.

He'd never have to come clean about lying to her.

When they had sex at Joyce's, he was immediately sent away. He never took it personally. On New Year's Eve she'd told him, still euphoric from the thrill, that he couldn't linger for fear of Jonathan hearing him. It was an oft repeated thing. Every time he met her at her house.

So he never meant for this to happen but since when did things ever go this well for him for this long?

He'd been out to Hawkins Lab. He did that now. Went out there, answered questions, had a badge, a keycard. Begrudgingly, he was back in the thick of it. Brenner was not Hopper's first government conspiracy and unfortunately, he wouldn't be the last. Once you were in these things, you didn't really get away from them. It was a cold truth that he'd only been reminded of when the car rolled into the ambulance lane at the hospital the night they'd saved Will.

Brenner's people were replaced by people Hopper knew and used to work for. The devil you know something something.

Halfway home from Hawkins Lab, Hopper turned around. It was a bad night. A bad day. Several bad things. And he hadn't seen Joyce in nearly a week.

He used the spare key, he pet the dog and got him a treat from the top of the fridge, he took off his boots and walked himself down to the end of the hall and slipped into Joyce's room. She was sleeping, it was almost 1:00 am and he certainly didn't expect her to be awake. But any notion of sex was off the table. Standing at the foot of her bed he realized at no point during the drive over here had he even

considered fucking her tonight.

He was lonely. It was a bad day. He should turn around and sneak back out and go home.

But that crushing loneliness threatened to widen the hole. The one he'd been trying to fill for years. The hole where his family used to be.

Hopper stripped down to his underwear and got into bed, resting on his side. Joyce stirred, rolling over to face him, and he panicked that she'd kick him out.

"What time is it?" she asked, without opening her eyes, her voice rough with sleep.

"It's a little after one," he answered, tentatively.

"Did I forget you were coming?"

"No, is it okay that I'm here?"

Joyce burrowed into him, shivering as she did it. "Your feet are cold."

"It's cool out," he said, feeling himself relax as she tangled her warm legs with his.

"You wanna?" Joyce asked, rubbing her nose against his chest and then kissing his sternum.

"Can I just stay here a minute?"

"Yeah," she said, then paused, he wondered if she'd fallen back to sleep fully. "Just make sure you're out by five. Jonathan's been getting up early."

With the reassurance that she wasn't gonna throw him out, he rolled onto his back, feeling a twinge of fondness when Joyce automatically fitted herself to his side further.

And he slept.



-

“Chief. Chief Hopper.” Eleven stood over him, glaring.

“What the-” He sat up in bed, cold sweats, frantically looking around for Eleven. He’d just seen her.

Joyce woke up too, but she was heading out of the room, she barely registered he was there, and it took a minute for him to realize that she was reacting not to some kid in her bedroom, but to one screaming down the hall.

“Mom!” he heard Will shout and Joyce was rushing as fast as her legs could carry her, until she tripped over his boots.

“What the fuck are you even still doing here?” she whispered, annoyed. “Don’t leave this room. They can’t know you’re here.”

“Does he always have nightmares?” Hopper asked concerned but also connecting what had just happened to himself with what was happening to Will.

“I don’t have time to explain this to you,” she snapped, before closing the door.

Hopper shook his head a couple of times, trying to clear it. Will was still screaming, even through the door he could hear him. He stood up to try and listen through the door to see what Joyce was saying to him.

Of course, he couldn’t hear well, the door was solid enough to muffle the sounds, so he cracked the door. Hopper tried to make out what he was saying while simultaneously putting on his pants. Joyce wasn’t coming back to bed happy after this and he wanted to be on his way out. It was just barely five so it’s not like he’d disregarded her request from last night.

“Mom, I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t get out! The Demogorgon and then Eleven.”

Hopper’s ears perked up and a sudden jolt went through him, like a shock of static electricity. It propelled him out of the room and down

the hall to Will's.

"What about Eleven?" Hopper asked.

Joyce startled and turned to glare at him. She was sitting on Will's bed, trying to calm him, Will was clinging to her, but when he heard Hopper he pulled away and looked at him confused.

"You said you saw Eleven, did she say anything to you?" he asked, sharper this time.

Joyce snapped, "Get out!"

"But I saw Eleven," Hopper argued. "If he saw her too maybe it means something!"

"He had a nightmare, you're not helping, get out!"

Her face was steely and he remembered that this woman would slaughter armies for her kids and he was the interloper in this. Hopper swallowed and turned back to the hall. He grabbed all his stuff from the floor, walking into his boots, not bothering to tie them, and headed out the front door. He slammed it for good measure. It was childish but he hated being reminded that he meant nothing to Joyce.

Once he'd gotten outside he had to dig in his pants pockets for his keys, he threw the rest of his stuff in the Bronco and stopped to zip his pants and to pull a shirt over his head.

"What are you doing here?" Jonathan startled him when he was putting his shirt on.

"Jesus, kid," he said, when he'd pulled the shirt completely over his head. "You're old enough to know what i'm doing here."

Jonathan bristled, wrapping his arms around himself for warmth in the early morning air. It struck Hopper that the mannerism matched Joyce's and that was weird, seeing her in Jonathan. He leaned over to the Bronco to dig a cigarette out of the pack in the center console to distract himself from the thought.

“I know how you are, don’t treat my mom-”

It was brave of the kid to try it but god, this was not the time.

“Stop.” he interrupted Jonathan’s stuttering attempt at nobility or chivalry or whatever the hell it was. “We’re not going to talk about this. Your mother doesn’t need anyone to protect her or make empty threats for her. It’s cute that you’re trying but don’t. If she knew you were, she’d be pissed.”

“But-” Jonathan tried again and Hopper shook his head.

“Don’t tell your mom that you came out here. Go back inside, make her breakfast, do whatever. Your mom and I are consenting adults and we don’t even talk about it to each other so we’re sure as shit not gonna sit you and your brother down for a family night and discuss it. There’s no *Brady Bunch* plan here so forget you ever saw me this morning.”

Hopper slid into the driver’s seat, started the car, and pulled out, leaving a confused Jonathan in his wake.

Next time, he’d know better than to come for whatever it was he’d come for. Not comfort. Just sex, that was it. Sex and get out.

He spent the rest of the day unfocused and annoyed. Had he screwed it up? Would she let him come back? All of that and then the pesky issue of seeing Eleven in his dream. The exact same time Will was having a nightmare. That could mean anything.

But he was going back to Hawkins Lab tonight. He was going to poke around and see if there was any word from the girl that had gone missing back in November.

The girl he exchanged for Will.

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## June 1984

Joyce had always held everything together with her own two hands. She didn’t take help well. The help she should have gotten, she gave

up fighting for because it was a waste of breath. Lonnie didn't help even when they weren't circling divorce. (Though to be fair, they'd been circling divorce since Jonathan's first birthday.)

Her mother had told her that she was pushy and bossy. Joyce used to hate when someone pointed it out but by this point in her life, she didn't give a shit. She'd learned that she had to be assertive to get anything done. It wasn't dramatic in the least to think that she might not have survived this long on her own if she was more timid.

And she'd been known to be timid. But important things like her earning power, her ability to feed her kids and give them the things they needed, protecting them, she wasn't passive. She was fierce. And it had worked with minimal help.

But then there was this business with ...she didn't even feel right referring to it as the Upside Down. That seemed like a kid's idea. A hell dimension? And alternate reality? Whatever it was, and the monster that lived there, it had made her doubt herself.

She stuck even closer to home now and she doted and worried over Will all the more. He wasn't allowed to ride his bike anymore. She or Jonathan picked him up and drove him where he needed to go. He had nightmares and she would get the heating pad and sing him back to sleep like when he was a baby. She'd let him stay up later or slide on his homework because she could remember the way they found him. She remembered every excruciating second of waiting for him to come back to her as Hopper pounded on Will's chest.

Will was almost lost and gone forever. There was no way she'd forget that anytime soon.

But the consensus tonight was that she was smothering him.

He'd gotten frustrated and lashed out, Joyce was shocked. She stood staring at the broken glass he'd thrown on the kitchen floor.

His hands were shaking, she knew that feeling, and he looked repentant but he mostly looked surprised and scared himself. Like he didn't know he had it in him to do that, throw a glass to the ground in anger like that.

Joyce took a deep breath and tried to go to him, to hold him and comfort him but he stepped out of her reach and ran to his room, slamming the door.

“Let me come in,” she tried, through the door.

“I’m fine!” he called out. “I’m sorry about the glass but can you please leave me alone? I don’t need you breathing down my neck, Mom.”

Even in his rebellious rage, he was moderately polite. She frowned, staring at the door for a minute before Jonathan spoke from the kitchen.

“You have been hovering a lot,” he said, his body shrinking back like he was worried about her reaction. “Give him a little space.”

Her brow furrowed and she considered the possibility that he was right. She’d been especially bad this week, since his last nightmare. Nothing to do with Hopper though. Definitely because of Will’s nightmare.

“Why don’t you go out, Mom?” Jonathan suggested, cleaning up the last bits of glass from the linoleum.

“Where would I go? And I can’t leave you two here, it’s...”

But she couldn’t think of a reason she needed to be in the house.

“Go out, maybe see a movie or something? I think you need a break. I can hold down the fort. I’ll make sure he’s safe, he might even talk to me if you’re not here.”

Her shoulders slouched. At the moment, she felt like a failure of a parent. Jonathan was going to get Will to open up and Joyce couldn’t. She sighed heavily and Jonathan nodded at her.

“Okay.” She grabbed her purse and keys and headed for the door, but backtracked quickly to the kitchen to hug Jonathan. “I’ll be back in a few hours. Be good.”

“Of course, Mom.”

When she got in her car though and started to drive, she realized what an absurd idea this was. Where was she going to go? Most everything was closed, it was eight on a Tuesday night, there might be a movie playing but Joyce didn't really want to sit in a dark room where she didn't know who was around her, all by herself. Before she'd consciously made the decision she'd driven herself halfway to Hopper's trailer.

Since the nightmare incident, they hadn't seen each other at all. It wasn't unusual persay, but when the dog had barked to go out in the middle of the night before last, she'd hoped he was barking at someone coming in. Instead, the dog just took a shit too close to her rose bushes and came back like he'd accomplished something worthy of high praise.

They didn't talk about things but she was very clear that they couldn't let the boys know what was going on between them. She didn't want to explain it. She didn't want a partner in parenting and she didn't think he wanted to be that person anyway. All that and he'd broken the rule and then he wanted to talk about it. There was no reason for her to tell Hopper about Will's nightmares. They weren't frequent, once every month or so, and they were manageable. Joyce had plenty of nightmares of her own after almost losing Will, after seeing that place he was trapped in.

Thankfully, Will hadn't asked. He'd fallen back to sleep a few minutes after Hopper had stormed out and either didn't remember or didn't mention it. Jonathan had acted a little weird that morning but she didn't think he'd seen Hopper so she felt like they'd dodged a bullet.

As she pulled up to Hopper's she felt a sinking feeling of rejection. He wasn't even home. He was likely at work, but the absence of his Bronco reminded her that she had nothing outside of her kids. Maybe she could have gone to Karen's, but it was a school night, and Karen had Holly, too. Parenting young children wore a person out, Joyce remembered those days.

Just as she was about to put the car in reverse, headlights crawled up and lit the interior of Joyce's car. And before she could even open her door, Hopper was doing it for her.

“What’s going on? Are you okay? Are the boys fine? Is it Will? Why’d you come out here? I was at work you could have called the station,” he went on and Joyce just looked at him confused.

“No, I-” She looked up at him from her spot still in her car.

“You what?” he pressed.

“Jonathan told me to go take a break,” she explained. “Said I’m smothering Will and I should relax for a few hours. Everyone is fine.”

Hopper scoffed, he turned and took three steps from her car, shaking out his limbs, taking off his hat and scratching at his head. He’d been worked up just because she was at his house. She didn’t know he cared that much and it was doing something to her. She swallowed, as if she could make whatever that feeling was, go away.

He walked up the porch, unlocked the door, and stood there for a second.

“Are you coming?”

Joyce realized she was still sitting in her seat, dumbfounded. She nodded and got out of the car so she could follow him inside.

“You want anything to drink?” he asked once they were inside, holding the fridge open and grabbing a beer for himself. She shook her head. “I got Diet Coke.”

She gave him a little smile. He hated the stuff but he had it here anyway. For her. Even though she rarely came out here.

“Not right now.”

Popping the top of his beer he wandered around the house. He pulled his uniform shirt off and tossed it on the chair, he moved a few pieces of mail off the coffee table and made a spot for her on the couch. She sat and adjusted the familiar afghan on the back.

“Happy Birthday,” she said, as he sat down to take off his boots. “I missed it but better late than never.”

He stopped unlacing his left boot and waited. "I broke the rules and you're being nice to me?"

"You were shaken up by a nightmare. I've had them too. Will has them monthly. Trauma, I've read, causes that. So, it was a bad time. Close to Sarah's-

"You're giving me a get out of jail free card on account of my birthday and my dead kid."

She narrowed her eyes. "Not if you're gonna be a dick about it."

"I didn't see Sarah, I saw Eleven."

The way he said Sarah's name didn't come with the usual sullen glance. He didn't even hesitate to say her name. It wasn't an appropriate time to bring it up but she was impressed. It was good healing progress on his part.

"I'm not gonna tell you what you did or didn't see. If you say you saw Eleven, fine. I believe you. I owe you that."

Hopper tilted his head and looked at her like he was seeing through her. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Let's not," she replied, grabbing the edge of the afghan and running her index finger along the holes she crocheted years ago.

They were flirting with a fight but she hoped they'd backed off in time.

He finished taking off his boots before taking another drink of his beer. "So Will thinks you're overprotective, huh?"

"Pass," she said, quickly.

"It's not a game show, it's a conversation." He gave her a half smile.

"Talking is what gets us into these messes," she replied with a sigh. "I should go."

"Go where?" he asked.



“Are you implying I have nothing better to do than be here with you?” she tossed out lightly, feeling herself relax.

“Uh, yep.”

She rolled her eyes and huffed. “I have places I could be.”

“But you came here.”

“Shut up.”

Hopper put his nose to his shoulder. “I need to shower. Wanna come with me?”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s dangerous. Your shower is miniscule and you are very large.”

“Yes, I am,” he said with a smirk.

She tilted her head. “I meant-”

“I know what you meant, Joyce,” he added. “So should I take a shower now or after?”

She felt her skin heat at the implication and bit her lip. “After, I can’t smell you from here so...”

“Good to know,” he said, scooting closer to her on the couch.

Joyce leaned into him easily, sighing content when her lips met his. Whatever this was, this mess of moments, it could send cracks through them and break them into a million pieces but kissing him felt right. Was it really that dangerous when it felt so safe?

-

Joyce woke to the phone ringing. It was dark in the room, darker than when they’d fallen asleep, it shouldn’t have been that dark.

Hopper grumbled, rolling out of bed and stumbling into the other room to get the phone. She scrubbed her face and stretched, looking over at the alarm clock but the screen was blank. A flash of lightning

streaked across the window. Oh. The power was out.

She threw off the blanket, shivering when the cool air hit her skin. It woke her up more fully, and she quickly grabbed her shirt from the floor and pulled it on. When she found her pants on the floor of the living room, Hop was just hanging up the phone.

“Power’s out all over town,” he said, picking up his own pants from the chair they’d been tossed on hours before. “I’ve got to go in.”

Joyce felt her heart speed up. “What? All over? Like at my house?”

“Sounds like it,” he said, unruffled.

She grabbed his wrist to check his watch. “Shit, it’s one and the power is out, who knows what the boys are up to?”

Flashes of Will curled up on the couch sobbing and Jonathan setting the house on fire with candles had her frantic.

“Where’d my keys go?” she snapped.

“In your purse, I assume.” Hopper handed her the bag, pausing from buttoning up his uniform shirt. “They’re fine. They’re responsible. You don’t have to hold them together. It’s not the end of the world that you’re here.”

She dug in her purse for her keys. “You don’t know that. Anything could happen.”

“The worst things that could have happened to them have already happened. They’re fine.”

Joyce would have glared at him, but it was dark and she could barely make out his face. There was no point in arguing about this. Not now, when she should have been out the door and on her way home an hour ago.

“You want me to drive you home?” he offered. “The rain is nasty”

“It’s just rain. I can drive myself home.”

“Never said you couldn’t,” he said.

There was something about the way he said it that made her linger instead of walking out. He was trying to calm her down and that was...nice. She took two steps and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him, quickly. The action felt ordinary, like a habit, normal.

“You should come over here more often,” Hopper said as she made her way to the door. “Maybe then I won’t think someone’s dead when your car’s here.”

“Maybe,” she threw over her shoulder before she ran down the stairs in the rain to her car.

A constant in Hopper’s life was his isolation. He looked fine from the outside, but Joyce knew he was lonely. It was worse, before, before they’d started spending time together, but he was still lonely.

Joyce had never felt alone like that. She sometimes wished for that kind of solitude, when the boys were smaller and needed more constant care. But he wasn’t wrong, they were getting older and had Will not gone missing last year, things would be different. He’d be more independent. She wanted to let him be like that but she was so scared.

But on the drive home, she realized that one day she’d be lonely too. Her boys would be gone in a few years. Jonathan would be gone sooner rather than later, then a few more years and Will would be off and then she’d have what? Tonight, she had nowhere better to go than Hopper’s place and that was a frightening prospect, but even more terrifying was that years from now, what would she do when the boys had grown?

As she pulled up to her house, she saw the lights flicker back on as the rain died down to a trickle. Inside the boys were cleaning up, a spilled bag of Cheetos was all over the living room, crushed into the carpet. Comic books covered the coffee table and it looked like the two of them had some kind of spitball contest the way the tv was covered in little flecks of paper.

“Mom,” Will said, surprised. “Uh, we had fun and we meant to clean

this up but then-”

Jonathan cut in, “The power went out and we couldn’t see, we only have the one flashlight and I couldn’t find the candles, so we just read comic books until the power came back on.”

“It’s fine,” she said, with a smile, reaching for Will to hug him, his outburst from earlier forgotten.

“You look...relaxed, Mom,” Jonathan said, his brow furrowing.

“Just needed a quick break, sorry I came back so late.”

There were still a few years ahead of her before she’d be alone in this house and for now, she needed to help the boys clean up.

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## **July 7, 1984**

It was permit day. The county had mailed the permits out and before he came to Hawkins, Flo would stick them in new envelopes and mail them to each business. Liquor licenses, food safety, hazardous material permits all needed to be doled out but Hopper preferred doing this little chore himself. It got him out and shaking people’s hands, a form of community outreach. Hawkins didn’t really need outreach, but it was a good bullet point for reports.

The air was humid, the summer’s heat pressing in on everyone, but he didn’t mind too much. That is until he walked into the bar to see Lonnie Byers sitting on a stool nursing a beer.

“Liquor license good for another year,” Hopper said, handing over the envelope to Joel, the owner.

He tried to avoid looking at Lonnie but out of the corner of his eye he saw Will sitting next to him. Hopper pressed his lips together and tried to think of some way to maneuver this situation without a fist fight.

“If it isn’t Chief Hopper,” Lonnie drawled.

Hopper sighed. "Here we go," he said under his breath.

Will looked over at Hopper, nervous.

"Lonnie, I know Hawkins is small but surely there's something better you can take your son to do than sit here at one in the afternoon."

Lonnie narrowed his eyes at Hopper.

"We're waiting on something," Lonnie grunted out.

Joel leaned over to Will. "There's a broken pinball machine back there, sometimes if you hit it just right, it let's you play for free."

Will's eyes lit up and he headed away from the simmering altercation quickly. Hopper was trying to avoid getting into it with Lonnie Byers, but the option was always there, it was better to not have Will near.

"Thanks for dropping the permits off, Hop," Joel said, trying to further diffuse the situation.

Hopper tipped his hat to Joel and turned to go when Lonnie stopped him.

"How long have you been fucking my wife?"

So much for not getting into it with Lonnie today. Hopper turned back to him.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, how long?"

Glancing back to Will at the pinball machine to check he wasn't hearing this, Hopper took a step closer to Lonnie. He never wanted to be this close to him, the urge to punch him had been brewing for years and he was on duty. There was professionalism to consider, but he also didn't want Will overhearing any of this. That was one of the rules. The boys don't find out.

"It's been a while, let me think," he started and saw Joel cringe out of the corner of his eye. "Senior year, that was what, '62 and '63,

hmmm, it was about 15 months I think. I'm counting the summer before senior year, though. And the last part of junior year as well. If we're getting technical. But I don't know why you'd want that information."

Lonnie scoffed. "That's cute. You know I mean now."

"I don't actually know what you mean, Lonnie. Had a little too much to drink? Maybe Joel ought to cut you off."

Lonnie laughed bitterly.

"Saw your brand in the trash when I picked him up today," Lonnie explained. "At first I thought Jonathan's balls finally dropped and he'd taken up Marlboros but they weren't hidden well. If he were trying to hide it, well, he's a smart kid, they wouldn't be on top of the back trashcan like that."

"This is amazing detective work. You should apply in Indianapolis," he said, hoping to bait Lonnie into a fist fight now just so he could avoid the questions.

"How long have you been fucking my wife, Hopper?" he repeated.

"Last I checked, you two are divorced and you're not up on your child support, which is something I could take you down to the station for."

"Can't hold me for it," Lonnie said.

"This is Hawkins. I can do a lot of things, it's just me." Hopper raised his eyebrows and hoped the threat got him to shut up.

Lonnie wasn't deterred. "Like fucking my wife?"

"It's none of my business and it's none of your business what she does with the precious little spare time she has. But she'd probably beat your ass herself if she knew you picked this fight over your own petty, insecurities all while calling her your wife like she belongs to you."

Finally Lonnie swayed just barely. "I swear to God, I'm gonna-"

“Threatening a police officer is definitely something I could charge you for so you might want to wait until you’re done visiting your son before you finish that sentence.”

They stood glaring at each other for a minute. Hop felt his hand ball into a fist voluntarily, but Joel let out a huff and snapped Hopper back to the moment. He looked over again at Will in the back and then back at Lonnie.

“Take your kid to the movies or something,” he ground out, before turning around and walking out.

There were still six other businesses he had to cover this afternoon but at the moment he really wished he had a punching bag. He gripped the steering wheel tightly before he dug a pill bottle out of the center console.

A couple of hours later, he was rounding out the list. The last stop was the McDonald’s on Fairfax Road and then he could be done. He had to stop into Hawkins Lab tonight but he was hoping that would be a quick trip. Once he’d calmed down, all he could think about was telling Joyce about his conversation with Lonnie. It would be messy, it definitely went against the no talking rule, but Lonnie was reckless and vindictive. Warning Joyce was in her best interest, he had no doubt she could handle her ex but she deserved a head’s up. He’d seen her in the aftermath of an altercation with Lonnie and it wasn’t pretty.

McDonald’s was uneventful, except for a run in with Margaret Timothy. She glared at him and called him a “pig” on his way out but it had been months since he’d slept around. He’d almost forgotten what it was like when he ran into a one night stand.

As he drove down the street, he fiddled with the radio. It was playing some Stones song he hadn’t heard in years but the signal was weak. He looked up and slammed on the brakes. A kid was just standing in the middle of the road.

“Shit,” he breathed out when he saw who it was.

He put the Bronco in park and hopped out quickly, running around

and grabbing Will's shoulders.

"I know your mom taught you to cross the street better than that," he scolded but Will didn't look at him. "Where's your dad, kid?"

Will's pupils were dilated and his skin was pale and cold despite the heat of July. Hopper gulped. Something was wrong.

"Will," he softened his tone. "Will, buddy, what's going on?"

But Will was practically catatonic. Quickly, Hopper considered his options: he could drive Will straight to the hospital where they would...well he wasn't sure what they would do. He could drive him home to Joyce. If she was missing Will, he would have likely had a radio already. The department knew not to even fuck with her and just get him immediately or she'd rip the poor officers to shreds. (Powell was particularly terrified of her which Hopper found hilarious.) If Joyce didn't even know Will was missing, that meant that Lonnie had done something.

He guided Will into the car and grabbed the radio handset. Clicking on the button, he lifted it up and started to say something, but thought better of it. This needed to stay clear of paperwork.

"Flo," he said into the radio. "I'm done with the permits so I'm gonna go home."

"Alright, Chief," her voice came over clearly. "Have a nice evening."

So that was that, he headed out to Joyce's.

The whole way there, Will said nothing despite Hopper's prodding. He just stared ahead, almost lifeless. It was eerie.

As he pulled up to Joyce's he saw Lonnie's Camaro and Joyce outside shouting. He couldn't see Lonnie at first but he came out of the house, his arms making wide motions like he was trying to remind Joyce he was bigger than her. It made Hopper's blood boil.

"Just between you and me, I must really like your mom because no other woman would be worth running into your dipshit of a father twice in one day."



It's not something he would have normally said to Will, but he hoped it might get some kind of a rise out of the kid. Anything but the blank look on his face. But still, he stared unmoving.

He looked back to Joyce, she was facing the car now, clutching her chest, relieved to see him, or likely relieved to see he had Will with him. She rushed the car, opening Will's door almost before the Bronco was in park.

Joyce grabbed Will's face and her brows furrowed. "What's the matter, baby? Are you sick?"

"Yeah," Will finally spoke, surprising and relieving Hopper. "I feel like I'm gonna throw up."

"Let's get you inside," she said, pulling him out of the car and clinging to him as she walked him back to the house.

Hopper considered letting that be the end of it, he could pull out now and avoid Lonnie but Joyce called for him.

"Where'd you find him, Hopper?"

"Yeah, tell us, where'd you find the kid?" Lonnie mocked, from his spot leaning against his car, lighting a cigarette.

"Take care of him first," Hopper said.

"Come in then," Joyce said, ignoring Lonnie altogether.

"I'm good out here, I'll wait." He nodded to Joyce and then took his hat off and set it on the hood of the Bronco before turning to Lonnie. "Losing your kid, that's a new low, even for you."

"Fuck off," Lonnie shot back.

Hopper took a deep breath, closed the space between them and clocked Lonnie in the face, knocking the cigarette from his mouth and causing Lonnie to fall backwards on the hood of his car. He lifted him up by his shirt collar and headbutt him, then let go of him so he fell the few inches back to the hood.

He rolled his shoulders, and stood back, waiting for Lonnie to get up, but he just kind of flailed there for a minute, holding his jaw and groaning.

“I’m gonna-”

“I’m not on duty right now and I’ve waited 30 years to kick the everloving shit out of you, let’s go, you bastard,” Hopper said, flexing his fists.

But Lonnie didn’t get up. It wasn’t a fair fight and Hopper rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“What the hell?” Joyce shouted from the porch. “I leave for a minute and you’re back at this dick measuring contest? I don’t have time for your asshole behavior, either of you.”

He didn’t look at her, just kept glaring at Lonnie.

“Get me some ice, Joyce,” Lonnie snapped.

Joyce scoffed and Hopper tried not to smile.

“Get it yourself, you idiot.” Joyce folded her arms. “You lost Will, there’s no way I’m helping you today.”

“He wandered off!” Lonnie shouted.

“When you were at Joel’s bar or at some other point,” Hopper asked.

Joyce’s eyes got wide and she took a step closer to Lonnie. “Joel’s bar? You come out for the first time since finding out your son is alive, and you took him to the bar? He wanted to go to the arcade!”

“He obviously took himself there,” Lonnie said, sitting up and rubbing his forehead.

Hopper tried not to smile at the sight of him, but it was cathartic after all these years.

“Is that where you found him?” Joyce asked Hopper.

He shook his head. "I almost hit him, he was standing in the middle of the road outside McDonald's. It's a good thing no one else found him. Did he say anything to you, inside?"

Joyce bit her lip. "No," but he knew she was lying.

Obviously, she didn't want Lonnie to know what was going on.

"Get out of here," she said, waving Lonnie off, but he didn't budge.

"I'm not leaving until he does."

"Oh for pete's sake," Joyce grumbled.

"I know what you two are doing, I'm gonna tell everyone about it."

For a second, Hopper was worried. Then he remembered he didn't actually care if anyone knew he was sleeping with Joyce. Joyce was the one that set that rule.

Joyce rubbed her temples. "That is the most childish response I've ever heard. Grow up!"

"So you are fucking my wife," Lonnie said to Hopper, a sick smile on his face.

Before Hopper could respond, Joyce leapt at Lonnie. Hopper reached in and grabbed her by the waist right before she got to him.

"Let me go, I'm gonna murder him," she screeched, arms swinging wildly. "I'm not your wife, you goddamn son of a bitch."

Lonnie had the nerve to laugh. "You two deserve each other."

He walked around to the driver's side and got into his car. Hopper loosened his grip on Joyce and she turned around to glare at him.

"It's not fair that you got to punch him," she ground out.

"I didn't expect him to have any restraint, he'd probably hit you right back."

"Woulda been worth it," she muttered as Lonnie drove off.

Hopper snorted. God, she was the best.

Lonnie peeled out and Joyce gave him the finger before turning back to the house.

He hesitated following her in but she called over her shoulder again. "Start talking, what was he like when you found him?"

"You don't wanna hear what happened earlier today at the bar with Lonnie?"

"You think I care?" she asked, walking to the kitchen and grabbing her Diet Coke can.

Hopper nodded in understanding, before shifting back to Will.

"It was like he was in a trance. He's lucky I'm the one that found him." Whenever Hopper had to deliver bad news he considered his audience, he'd learned a long time ago that how you told someone news could soften everything. With Joyce he tried to be mindful of her anxiety but this was scary shit so he needed her to know how serious it was. "He didn't recognize me, he didn't answer any of my questions, I doubt he knew his own name. And he didn't get better. I was surprised he talked to you."

Joyce took a sip of her soda, then drummed her fingers on the can. She didn't want Lonnie to know what was going on and he wondered now if she was going to lie to him, too. It stung a little but he understood. Talking to him about this constituted actually talking *and* accepting help. Neither of those things were on the table. Ever.

"He's taking a shower, I'm gonna sit with him tonight and watch him," she said, putting down her can and taking a few steps to get into Hopper's space.

She reached up and touched his forehead, pushing in on the spot where his head had connected with Lonnie's. He winced.

"That's gonna bruise," she said.

Joyce grabbed some ice from the freezer, wrapped it in a dish towel, and held it up against the spot causing Hopper to hiss.

“Don’t pout, you big baby,” she said. “I’m still mad at you for not letting me hit him.”

“That’s fair.”

They stood there for a minute, just looking at each other, in comfortable silence.

“I’m exhausted,” Joyce said, finally.

“It’s been a rough day.” He reached up and took the ice from her, putting it in the sink without moving from his spot.

She wrapped her arms around his middle and rested her head on his chest, he wound his arms around her and leaned his chin down to rest on the top of her head.

They didn’t do this.

He knew they *shouldn’t* do this. It was too intimate and Will could walk in at any moment. But he hoped it brought her some comfort. She wouldn’t talk about it but he wanted her to feel like she had someone. That she wasn’t alone. That’s all he ever wanted, he wanted to stop feeling so alone.

They stood like that for a couple of minutes, until they both heard the bathroom door open. Joyce pulled away first, leaving him with that empty feeling again. But he headed for the door.

“Just let me know if you need anything,” he said.

“We’re fine, thanks for bringing him back.”

-

Hawkins Lab still gave Hopper the creeps. It was always too cold, the industrial air conditioning giving it that odd recycled air stench, and the fluorescent lights in combination with no windows always took a few minutes to adjust to.

The whirl of the machines when he walked into the control room where they monitored the gate signaled that they had someone in

there. In the Upside Down.

"I read your weekly report, nothing at all happened?" a man in a lab coat with thick glasses asked Hopper.

"Nothing at all. I keep telling you, there's no point in me even submitting those reports. Everything has been picture perfect and normal since November." He glanced at a monitor, a static filled picture of what was on the other side of the gate shimmered back and forth. "It's a waste of my time to do those reports, Dr. Gordon."

"But you're going to keep doing them," Dr. Gordon replied.

"Great," muttered. "Anything happen here?"

"Nothing that concerns you," Dr. Gordon answered.

Hopper gave a mocking salute, Gordon hated that. But neither of them were in the military anymore so there wasn't a damn thing the scientist could do about it.

As he headed out, a doctor came chasing after him down the hallway. She was tall, almost as tall as he was, and her grey hair was always in a messy bun on top of her head that reminded him of a very frazzled vice principal.

"Jim," she called. "Did anything happen today?"

He stopped, schooling his features and choosing his words carefully. "I got into a fist fight but I hardly think that has anything to do with alternate dimensions, Dr. Lyman."

She made a humming sound and then turned to go. Normally, Hopper would let this interaction go but maybe something happened on the other side to put Will in that stupor he was in earlier.

"Dr. Lyman, did anything happen here?"

"Just a little glitch in the system, I think. I'll have to check the cables. See you next week," she said as she skittered off, far too quickly for a woman of her age.

**July 18, 1984**

Joyce was used to the world being against her but it was times like this that she was reminded. She was in the grocery store, one foot wedged on the bottom shelf in between a couple of cereal boxes, her other leg stretched behind her for balance, her left hand holding onto the middle shelf for leverage, and her right hand reaching for the last cannister of oatmeal on the very back of the top shelf. This was a typical day at the store for her. It was impressive that she'd managed to get everything on her list except the oatmeal before she ended up like this. Some trips she might have to do this maneuver three or four times to get all her stuff.

The oatmeal was just out of her reach, so she bounced a little, wiggling and stretching her fingers trying to get to the oatmeal.

"You're going to break something," Hopper's voice came from behind her.

He reached over her, his chest against her back and his arm brushing hers as he effortlessly grabbed the canister. He tossed it into her cart and stepped back so she could get down.

"I could have gotten that myself."

He scoffed. "It's like you're allergic to accepting help of *any* kind."

Joyce pressed her lips together and her brow furrowed. "Shut up."

Hopper shook his head. He was carrying a basket on his arm with spaghetti sauce, spaghetti, frozen garlic bread, a couple of apples, and a box of Eggos.

"What are you doing tonight?" Hopper asked.

"Um, picking up Will at Dustin's house at 9:30. Jonathan's working overnight stocking. So if you want to come over tonight you can, maybe at 10:30?"

"I was thinking maybe you could come to my place, I'm making

spaghetti.”

“Even I can make spaghetti,” Joyce said, with a laugh, but Hopper faltered.

“But if I make it, you don’t have to cook anything, or clean up, I’d do it for you.”

“Are you talking about a date?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“No, that would be weird.” Hopper shifted his basket from one hand to the other like it was too heavy. “This would be dinner before sex.”

Joyce looked at her watch. It was only five. She had plenty of time before she needed to pick Will up. And he only had jar spaghetti sauce. It’s not like it would take forever to make the food.

“Okay,” she said, pushing her cart towards the front of the store.

He ran to keep up with her. “So you’re gonna meet me at my house or?”

“I have to take my stuff home. I’ll see you in half an hour.” Joyce lined up at the register behind Mr. Newberry. “Stop talking to me in public, Jenny Greer is giving me the evil eye,” she whispered.

“I didn’t even sleep with her, I don’t know why she’s doing that,” he said, leaning over her and getting right in her ear.

She swatted him away. “I don’t know why anyone would want to.”

He gave her a 100 watt smile and waggled his eyebrows, walking backwards towards the other register. It took a significant amount of effort to not grin back at him, so she just sighed exasperated. He was insufferable.

-

Joyce was out of breath, she felt that winding in her stomach , and then Hopper’s hand moved from her hip, closer in, so his thumb could reach her clit. She cried out and felt her muscles clenching, he thrust up into her twice more before shuddering with his own



release.

She leaned her head against his shoulder and laughed into the skin of his neck.

“You have garlic bread breath,” she said.

He pinched her side and she yelped.

“You do, too,” he came back, lifting her off of him and tossing her to the couch cushion next to him. She laughed when he leaned over and kissed her, nipping at her lips a few times before he got up.

“What time is it?” she asked, sitting up and pushing her hair behind her ears.

“Uh, nine,” he called from the bathroom.

She needed to get ready to pick up Will. Taking in the room, she looked around for her clothes and spotted her shirt on the floor on the other side of the coffee table.

“Where’s my bra?”

“You weren’t wearing one,” he said, coming out in some flannel pajama pants.

“I wasn’t?” Her shirt was tangled in with his pants and it was taking more effort than it should to untangle the two garments.

“You weren’t. I remember thinking that was a nice surprise.” He came up behind her and kissed her shoulder and put his arm across her belly.

Sometimes he got like this, all touchy feely even after the sex. She didn’t mind it but while she was still trying to unravel his pants from her shirt it was less endearing and more hindering her work.

A button from her shirt was stuck on the belt loop of the pants, once she’d finally gotten it, she held both items up in the air and shouted, “Tada!”

She felt him shake his head against her skin and then back up, moving towards the kitchen.

“A true hero, you’ve liberated your shirt from my jeans.”

She scoffed at him before dropping his pants and pulling on her shirt. Joyce put on her panties, then went to get her shorts, but they’d been pushed under the coffee table further so she had to get down on her knees and stretch her arm to get them. She pulled them out along with a lanyard with some cards attached to the end, she didn’t think anything of them, just dropped them on the coffee table and put her shorts on. As she was looking down to button her shorts the words on the badge of the lanyard caught her eye.

**Chief Jim Hopper**  
**Hawkins Lab**  
**Consultant**

Joyce felt her stomach drop, she swallowed, picked up the lanyard, she needed to see it up close, and read it again. “What the fuck is this?”

He turned to her and instantly froze.

“Nothing.” He tried to take the badge from her and she took a step back. He didn’t move to follow her or try to take it back again.

“Why do you have this, what is this?”

“It’s a badge and keycard.” He was too calm, Joyce wished he’d have any reaction other than the one he was having.

“So what, you’re doing what for them?” She couldn’t even look at him, she just kept rubbing her fingers across the badge with this stupid face on it and those words.

“It’s not Brenner. He’s gone. It’s different people.”

“And that makes it better how?”

“I’m trying to help.” He took a step closer to her now and she resisted the urge to flinch.

“What could you be doing there that is helpful?” she asked, finally looking up at him.

“They’re trying to find Eleven.”

It was surprising that he didn’t hesitate to answer the question. Maybe that meant something. Maybe he was trying to be honest and transparent, but immediately she remembered that he’d been lying to her. Not outright, but at the very least, by omission.

“Oh, well, I’m sure the reasons they’re trying to find her are good and noble and not because she’d be a great weapon or asset for some ridiculous government plot to crush the Russians.” She was disgusted.

“I still have to try and help.” His tone was gentle, contrite, but again, she reminded herself that he’d been lying to her.

“Why? She’s gone. The boys said she’s gone.”

“I traded her for Will!” he blurted out and Joyce felt like she’d been punched in the gut.

She sputtered before gaining her strength again. “Why would you do that? I would *never* have done that.”

“I know, that’s why. If you didn’t get Will back, you...you wouldn’t have survived that.”

“I never asked you to do that for me. And don’t you dare say that this was about me.”

“It wasn’t about you, it was about saving the kid I could save.” His jaw clenched. “It was a little about you.”

“Saving the kid you could save?” She scoffed. “We could have saved them both!”

“It’s inevitable, Joyce. When you’re in this, when you’re mixed up with the government and their secret experiments, there’s no leaving it, ever. Eleven, there’s no chance for her to get out. Not before. Not under Brenner. If you escape all the plots and evil men masquerading

as scientists and patriots, you end up like Terry Ives.” He tried to reach for her face and she shook her head and took another step back.

“Like her mother. Eleven’s mother. Why does everyone throw away the mothers? Why are we disposable?” She felt her voice waver and she hated it, hated how emotional the mention of Terry Ives made her. “If it’s so inevitable why are you bothering to help?”

“Because I can’t not.” He paused, his face pained. “I have to help.”

“Why you?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. You can’t...you never...”

This sad, guilty act was getting old. She didn’t want to feel sorry for him.

“What? Spit it out!” she demanded.

“I’ve never been to Vietnam, Joyce,” he snapped. “I’ve heard it was a shit hole and I know men have gone crazy from their tours but I would gladly have gone to trade what my draft meant.”

“What are you talking about?”

None of this made sense. Now it was worse. He’d been lying to her for years. Not just months. She started to shake her head, her whole body feeling tight and panicked.

“I was pulled out of training in ‘65, moved from the pipeline for Vietnam, my assignment changed. I was going to work on a special project, one like MK Ultra, but I didn’t get any superpowers out of it. I was barely a security guard, I was an MP, military police. But I saw shit. And once you see the shit, you’re stuck. It’s inevitable. How do you think I knew how to look for the bugs and-”

“I have to go,” she cut in.

This was too much.

“What?”

"I have to get away from you. I have to pick up Will but, I have to get away from you. I'm...I can't think, I can't fathom," she tried to make her words come out clearly but she felt herself stuttering. "...I have to go."

Joyce grabbed her purse and ran out of the house as quickly as she could. She dug in her bag looking for her keys and was happy to feel them in the bottom of the purse right away. She didn't know what she'd do if he came out after her.

But he didn't come after her.

It was impossible to get herself under control by the time she got to the Hendersons' so she just honked the horn to let them know she was there. Will came out with no comment, thankfully, and he didn't say anything about the tear tracks on her face. She hoped he just didn't see them in the dark car.

By the time she crawled into her bed, her eyes were raw and every muscle in her body felt like she'd run a marathon and then worked a whole week without a day off. It took her hours to fall asleep. She hated herself for spending those waking hours perking up at every sound, hoping he'd sneak into her bed and tell her it was all an elaborate practical joke.

That's how she knew she'd gotten too close to him. She didn't want any of it to be true and she wanted him to comfort her.

This never should have happened because she should have never let anyone get this close.

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## **August 5, 1984**

Hopper's mood was linked to his beard. His mother hated his facial hair, she always told him he looked unkempt and lawless, his father taught him how to shave when he was 14 because he didn't like the shadow his face grew, told him he looked like a young cartoon villain. When he first came back to Hawkins, Flo demanded he at least keep it trimmed out of a need for professionalism. But he didn't

take orders from Flo so he never listened, but he did give her a kind smile instead of telling her to fuck off. She meant well.

So it was no surprise that since Joyce hadn't spoken to him in two weeks, his beard took on the semblance of some mountain man from Appalachia.

Two weeks wasn't that long. They would routinely go a week without speaking to each other, seeing each other, or having sex. They were both adults with busy lives. But this was deliberate, she was avoiding him and it was his fault. He knew he fucked this up.

But he still couldn't reconcile any other way for this to have gone down. He knew that Eleven taking out the monster had relieved him of his guilt for telling Brenner where she was. There was no child to take back. No Brenner to come calling for her anymore. Yet here he was, wrapped up in this again. Checking in twice weekly with the lab.

At first it had just been thorough reports of what happened when he and Joyce went after Will. Then written statements about what Joyce had said about the monster in her walls, the level of ability Eleven had displayed.

Then they'd set up the box in the forest. It was monitored but the food never left until they'd called off the surveillance. After that, the food would be gone some days and left rotting other days. They tried having Hopper be the one to put food in the box. That didn't change the patterns of pickup so they used other people. Still it was spotty and there was no rhyme or reason to it.

There were daily trips through the gate, looking for her, looking for monsters, looking for samples for the dozens of nerds to study. But still they knew almost nothing. Hopper was sure that was why there was a line on his weekly report that said, "Current Status of Will Byers." He never checked the line. Even when he found out about the nightmares, even after the time he found Will wandering.

He stood in front of his bathroom mirror picking at his whiskers. Despite being torn up about Joyce and this whole situation, it might be time to trim his beard. At least clean it up. But there was a knock

on the door, halting his internal discussion.

When he opened the door, Joyce blew in, pushing him out of the way, and speaking before he even knew what was going on. Had he woken up this morning or was this a dream? She was wearing a tank top and jean cutoffs, he'd had less suggestive dreams than this.

"I need to speak to whoever is in charge. They can help Will."

"What?" Hopper asked, squinting and trying to figure out what was going on.

"I want to speak," she started, her face set and her eyes strong. "No, I *need* to speak to whoever is in charge in the lab. They have to help Will."

"Help Will what? I told you, they don't know what is going on. They're studying it but they don't know anything," he explained. "What's going on with Will now?"

Joyce wasn't panicked. She wasn't nervous or anxious, at least she didn't look it. Her hands weren't shaking or fidgeting with her keys. She was on a mission.

"Someone has to help Will, we have to help him."

Hopper scoffed. "I didn't spend the last nine months telling them that Will is fine for you to march him in there and tell them he's not."

"What did you say?" she asked, shocked.

"Whatever is going on with Will, we can fix out here, not in there. You don't want him mixed up in there." He had to get her to understand but Jesus, she never listened. "If you let them have at him, he'll end up like Eleven or Terry Ives and you don't want either of those outcomes. They'll treat him like a lab rat, they'll do god knows what to him."

"He doesn't have superpowers or whatever nonsense, he just...he's forgetting where he goes and he's having horrible nightmares, he's spacing out."

"I know, but you're not listening to me! I'm the guy telling you that when you get wrapped up in this stuff, you don't get unwrapped. This is it, forever. He's 13 years old, he can't be in this. We can find another way to fix him. I'll find another way to fix him."

"How?"

She called him on his bluff and he cringed. Of course he didn't know how. Not at the moment.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But we'll figure it out."

"Go back to the part where you said you've been telling them he's fine." She crossed her arms over her chest, and he really wanted to explain all of this in that soft afterglow of a good fuck or at least give her a Diet Coke or something, but that wasn't gonna happen.

"Why?" he asked, hoping to deter, derail, do anything other than talk about this more.

"You didn't say that. Before. When you told me about the lab. When you told me about looking for Eleven. They ask about Will?"

"Every time I'm there," he said.

Joyce's face contorted and she looked like she might cry, her confident stance crumbling.

"Are you sleeping with me so you can keep an eye on him?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"No!" he said, forcefully.

She started to shake her head, unsure. He reached for her face, gently, guiding her, encouraging her focus on him. She didn't flinch or move away. She let him.

"I wouldn't. I didn't. That's not why."

She bit her lip. "Don't tell me why."

He nodded his understanding. They didn't talk about it. Rule number



one.

“But they ask. And I would never have told them anything but ‘he’s fine’ because they can’t take him. You don’t want that. He’s just the only person to have survived so long. He didn’t have a suit, he was so sick when he came back. They’ve got his medical records and everything. They want to know what’s going on with him, but they know they’d have to go through you first and you can’t let them. You certainly can’t walk him in there and tell them the truth.”

She took his hand that rested on her chin and moved it down, holding it against her chest. He tried to contain his reaction over the touch. No one had touched him in two weeks and he was starved for it.

“Are they watching us?” she whispered.

“No, no of course not.” He ran his thumb along her hand and hoped she was calmed by it, he desperately hoped she wouldn’t let go.

“You say that like it’s crazy to wonder.” She gave him a stern look. “Don’t patronize me. I’m not insane.”

“You’re not,” he confirmed. “They don’t do things like Brenner did. But they ask me.”

“So you’re telling me no one in this town knows that we’re doing...this.” She gestured with her free hand between the two of them. “But a government agency does and prefers to ask you about *my* son and his health?”

“No, they don’t know either, it’s just...I told them,” he said and Joyce’s eyes got wide. “No, I didn’t tell them about us. I told them that Will was fine. I volunteered the information. So I could control it.”

“I don’t understand any of this.” She looked down, but she squeezed his hand tighter, like he could anchor her. If she’d let him, he would.

“I know.”

“Are we safe? Are they going to try and take Will?”

“I won’t let them.”

“I won’t let them.” Joyce’s face was closed and steely now. “He’s my son and I won’t let them.”

He nodded, trying to ignore the way she set herself apart again, reminding him that he didn’t have a place and he didn’t have a say because it was her son and she never wanted help. But there was minute forward motion at least in her being here right now. In her talking to him about this.

“What happened today?” he asked, hoping to hear what had caused this shift in her.

Joyce sniffed and took a deep breath, like she needed to prepare herself. He realized that the rollercoaster of information he’d just laid on her was probably exhausting, as if her default wasn’t already bone tired.

“Sit down.” He guided her to the couch and she sat, releasing his hand. “Do you want something to drink? Maybe something harder than Diet Coke?”

She waved him off. “I hate it when someone says that, Lonnie always tried to get me drunk before telling me how I was worthless. I’d take it just to soften the blows to my ego.”

A fresh bout of rage and anger sprung up in him, Lonnie was a monster. But what must Joyce be feeling right now to let that information go so cavalierly? He hoped maybe she’d finally gotten to the point where she’d tell him things like that. Then he remembered the no talking rule and decided it was more likely because she was feeling off kilter.

“Diet Coke it is,” he said, tightly, trying to keep himself calm for her benefit.

When he brought her the soda he sat down next to her, she leaned into his side and he put an arm around her and again he tried not to show any overt signs of his contentedness from her touch. Two weeks was too long. Clearly.

“He didn’t get up this morning,” Joyce started, after she’d taken a few sips of her coke. “I thought, I wasn’t sure what I thought, he was breathing but he wasn’t waking up.”

Hopper held her a little tighter.

“Then the lights, his lamp, the hall light, they started flickering. I was terrified. It was like before.”

“But Will was asleep?”

She nodded. “It only lasted a few seconds, the bulb in his lamp blew, and then he woke up. He woke up not knowing what had happened. Confused, asking why I was in his room.”

Hopper felt her shiver.

“That’s why you came, because of the lights?”

“He’s at home with Jonathan. I’m worried about school starting. I’m worried something might happen at school and I won’t know.”

“You’ll have to talk to the other boys. Have them looking out for him. They’re a bunch of shits but they’re his friends, they’ll be careful and as long as you put the fear of God in them, they’ll report back if anything happens.” He moved some hair off of her face. “There’s still a few weeks before school though, and I think there’s someone I can talk to about Will.”

“Who?” she asked, suddenly pulling away from him, looking up with that spark of hope in her eyes.

“A doctor, she’s there now, at the lab. I knew her way back when. She’s different than some of the other scientists. And I think she knows I’ve been lying but she hasn’t said anything about it to anyone.”

“Can you trust her?”

“Hell if I know,” he admitted. “But I can float some things. See if she bites.”

"I'm still mad at you for lying about this." Her tone was harsh but her hand moved to his cheek and she slid her thumb along his whiskers, he hissed because she was going against the grain.

"I deserve that."

"Get back to me when you talk to your person."

It would be greedy to expect her to sit with him all day, but it didn't stop him from wishing it.

"Okay," he told her. "I can go out there tonight."

"Good, when you're done, just come over, I don't care how late it is."

"She might not have any information, we might not be able to trust her," he said.

The worst thing he could imagine was getting Joyce's hopes up and then having to crush them.

"Fine, come over anyway." She stood up but before she went anywhere, she turned and scratched at his beard again. "You should shave, clean up this mess."

He gave her a half smile. "I'll do that before I come over."

"Good," she said, leaning down to kiss him.

It wasn't quick or chaste, it was like she missed him. Her hand still on his jaw, he even heard her sigh, relieved. He reached out and held onto the belt loops of her cutoffs and she made a squeak in the back of her throat.

"I'm sorry," he whispered when she pulled away, finally, breathless.

"Still mad at you," she replied, but he could see she was fighting a grin. "I'll see you tonight."

And then she was gone and everything felt a little more manageable.

Dr. Gordon took his report with no comment, Hopper excused himself, with a last look at the gate. It always creeped him out but it felt a little more ominous tonight. He headed down the hall to the lab where Dr. Lyman was usually puttering around.

She was in there, messing with petri dishes, fiddling with her microscope and oversized Q Tips. Hopper cleared his throat and leaned on the half open door. Dr. Lyman didn't hear him, so he tried again, this time with a clear cough.

"I know you're back there, I just thought you'd start talking without prompting," she said, not even turning around.

"Anything exciting happen today?" he asked, trying to be casual. "Looks like you're busy, like something happened."

She turned to him, her eyes were bright and excited. "They brought me slugs!"

"Okay." He wasn't sure how he was supposed to respond to that kind of unbridled excitement over slimy shit.

"Also there was a temporal disturbance like the one on Fairfax Street last month. But this morning. Over near the Byers house. Did you notice anything of report?"

The second bit of information was far more intriguing to Hopper but Dr. Lyman brushed over it like it was trivial. He guessed those slugs were exhilarating. But he couldn't give away too much, so instead of asking about the temporal disturbance, he figured slugs was the way to start.

"What's up with the slugs?"

"Do you want to shut that door?"

"What?" he asked confused.

"You're leaning on it half closed like you want to shut it, is there something you'd like to speak about privately? You can shut the door, it's fine." Her reading glasses perched on the top of her head started to slide and she awkwardly pushed them up with the back of

her hand.

“Nope,” he said, pulling off the door and coming closer so he could see her slugs. “So, the slugs?”

“Oh!” The distraction worked and she was heated about the slugs again, taking a pen and using it to point to three different tanks on her counter. “This one came right from Sample 3.”

It was a black slug the size of his hand, wiggling and trying to climb the glass.

“Sample 7.” She pointed to the second tank and he noted that the slug was much smaller, maybe the size of his pinkie.

The last tank had what looked like very murky water that was moving.

“And, this was taken right from the blood vessels of Sample 1, Barbara.”

Suddenly Hopper felt sick. “You mean, when you say Sample...”

“The bodies that you found in the library. The people are dead but their bodies are like fertile soil for these little terrestrial mollusks! There were five slugs but two didn’t make it through the gate which has me assuming that a great amount of power transfer happens when you pass through the gate.”

She kept talking and he started to get a little light headed.

“But they’re not normal slugs, oh no, I’ve already seen them try to attach themselves-”

“That’s enough about slugs,” Hopper cut in.

“You look a little pale.”

“Those slugs were using people as food so I’m gonna be pale for a minute,” he told her.

“As I recall, you never did have the stomach for science, Jim,” she

said, turning back to her petri dishes and papers.

He closed his eyes a minute to try and focus. "Nerds do nerd things. It's my job to tell you what I saw. Beyond that, I'm not even sure why I'm here."

"To keep that boy safe, to try and find that girl. These other 'nerds' aren't very good at reading people but I was a medical doctor for many years before I became a scientist."

None of her words were meant as a question, she assumed them to be truth and he didn't argue because they were true, but he didn't have to tell her that.

"Pride yourself on reading people, huh?" he asked and she hummed in agreement. "To be the fertile soil for those slugs, were the people dead first?"

"I can't be sure," she looked at him and paused before continuing on. "You'd know better than me, you're the one who found the Samples."

"The people," he reminded her, wishing she'd look at them as what they were before they were slug incubators.

"From what I can hypothesize, I'd say the Samples were kept alive for a day or so, letting their blood circulate and their lungs-"

He put his hands up to stop her. "Yes or no on your theory is fine. I don't need details."

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Dr. Lyman asked, tilting her head.

"No. Nothing to report," he lied.

She didn't push him and he was glad for it. Dr. Lyman turned and rummaged through some papers, her pen sliding down the page, looking for something. She started humming before she turned to him, her eyes not focused on anything, like she was running ideas in her head.

"You know...If someone were to have these slugs inside of them, and

they were, miraculously alive, maybe rescued from the gate and brought back to this side.” She tapped the pen against her temple. “I’d think it would cause some really interesting phenomenon, here in Hawkins and in the Sample.”

“The person,” he corrected her without thinking.

Will. Will had that tentacle thing down his throat and he had slugs in him, Jesus, this was bad. They hadn’t saved him. Not yet.

“Right,” she said, a creepy kind of smile pulling her lips wide. “But the slugs could probably be removed. An x-ray to see the extent of internal damage, then a quick surgery. It might take a few hours but any idiot surgeon could do it. Hell, even I could.”

Hopper’s jaw clenched involuntarily.

“Wouldn’t the hospital have looked for that? Assuming the person was seen in a hospital.”

“Did anyone tell the hospital what really happened to the boy?” She cleared her throat. “Pardon me, the Sample?”

A chill ran up his spine and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He looked at his watch for a reasonable excuse to break eye contact with Dr. Lyman.

“This has been a fun hypothetical about your disgusting slugs from another dimension but it’s getting late so I’m gonna head out. Have a nice night, Dr. Lyman.”

He hoofed it back to the parking lot as fast as he could possibly go without raising any red flags. His heart beating fast the whole time, sure that Dr. Lyman would send someone after him.

When he’d made it out to the main road he pulled over and tried to calm down. He dug into his center console for a pill and took a few minutes to breathe. Waiting was both about getting himself under control but also because he wanted to be sure no one was following him. If he was heading to Joyce’s, he didn’t want them to know that. Not that it mattered. He was probably being paranoid. But he was panicked enough for a minute to consider skipping the stop at her



place altogether.

Joyce wasn't going to like hearing about this but it seemed like the most reasonable explanation. The problem, though, was that he didn't trust Dr. Lyman. He didn't want Will in that building. Instead of removing the slugs, she might decide to keep him there for observation, do whatever kind of tests on him, if Dr. Gordon found out about Will, that would be the end of it. Dr. Gordon did some sick shit in the 60s and Hopper didn't think that Will's age would deter him.

Finally, he had himself together enough to drive to Joyce's. Enough time had passed that he didn't feel like someone was following him, but he stayed alert the whole drive there.

Jonathan's car wasn't there and the lights in the house were all still on. Instead of going to the back door like he normally did, he knocked on the front door. The dog came around from the side of the house and waited with him for Joyce to open the door.

"You look worse than you did earlier," Joyce said, as she stepped aside so he could come in.

"Thanks," he said, dryly.

He walked straight to the kitchen and got a treat from the container on top of the fridge for the dog.

"You spoil that dog."

Hopper rubbed behind the dog's ears. "He's the only one that knows I'm here all the time," he muttered, not sure where Will was and not wanting him to overhear.

Joyce shook her head and rolled her eyes. He followed her out of the kitchen. She stopped at Will's door, it was open, the room was dark, but he could make out Will sleeping in his bed. Joyce leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over her chest, and watched him. Hopper stood behind her, wondering if he should be doing something else, until she shifted her weight and leaned her back against his chest.

"I usually have to fight him to get in bed, but he came in here after *Murder, She Wrote* and fell right to sleep."

"He likes *Murder, She Wrote* ? Kid's a little weird, Joyce." He ran his hands up and down her arms, just because he could. He'd missed touching her.

She elbowed him at the comment. "Shut up. What did you find out?"

"You want the good news or the bad news first?"

Joyce took a deep breath and then exhaled. She pulled the door shut then made her way back to the kitchen table to get a cigarette. He sat and did the same from his own pack in his pocket.

"Bad news first," she said, filling up two glasses of water at the sink before sitting down.

"Will might have slugs in him." Hopper dropped the bomb and winced, rip the bandaid off, that's the method he was going for.

Joyce's brows knit and her lips turned down. "Slugs?"

Hopper explained the theory that Dr. Lyman had given him about the slugs, he told Joyce about how Dr. Lyman was thrilled to study them and had offered up the theory about Will without prompting.

"I'm pretty sure she knows what's going on." He ran a hand through his hair.

"But she thinks she can help him," Joyce asked, hopeful.

Hopper huffed and moved his head side to side, trying to figure out the best way to go on. "Yes, but I don't think we want her help."

"I want her help," Joyce shot back.

"It's dangerous. They might decide to keep Will to study him instead of help him."

"Got any other ideas to help him?" she asked, sharply.

“Not right now, but, well, maybe...I don’t know,” he said, putting his cigarette out in the ash tray.

Joyce stood up before doing the same thing with her cigarette. She held out her hand to him.

“Come on, let’s go to bed.”

His first thought was to look around to see who she might be talking to. He knew the look on his face wasn’t subtle because she huffed like he was an idiot and wiggled her fingers.

“Where’s Jonathan?” he asked, taking her hand and standing up to follow her.

“He’s spending the night at Steve Harrington’s house. Before you ask, I have no clue what is going on with those three kids and I sincerely hope they’re smoking pot because beyond that I don’t want to imagine.”

Hopper snorted. “They’re probably having a-”

Joyce whipped around and covered his mouth with her whole hand. “You’re disgusting.”

“Party,” he finished, his voice muffled from behind her hand, she moved it away but gave him a look of warning. “That Harrington kid’s parents are always out of town. I’ll bet you a dollar that I find out tomorrow there was a kegger there.”

“Aren’t you supposed to stop that kind of stuff?” she asked as she walked into her room and turned on the lamp.

“Kids are gonna be kids,” he said, shrugging. “No worse than we used to do and I’m not on duty tonight.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed and started to unlace his boots. Joyce took off her pants and started pulling back the covers. (He never understood why she felt the need to keep a made bed, especially with her ever long to do list.) When she finished that, she came around and wedged herself between his knees, he kicked off his boots and let her pull his shirt over his head before he reached for

her hips. She shivered when his fingers dug into her sides.

The thing was, he loved this part, sure, but he loved all the parts. He loved getting that rare smile out of her, he loved that she was a little less beat down by life when he was touching her skin. The way she moved more freely around him, fluid and smooth, and less like an over caffeinated hummingbird. When she was above him, she was enthralling. But he got the same thrill when she made a joke at his expense. Even if they fought, he spent weeks thinking about what she'd said, she permeated every part of his miserable life now, and he wished, hopelessly, that at some point Joyce would let him be part of hers.

Tonight it was slow, not frantic like it sometimes was, not silly and fun like when she'd laugh into his neck. Slow, steady, soft touches and and lazy kisses. It was special. Like apologies and promises and things they didn't talk about because they'd just make a mess of it.

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### **August 6, 1984**

Joyce rolled over to see Hopper up and putting his pants on. She looked at the clock and groaned.

"I have to work a double today."

"You want me to bring you lunch?" he asked, adjusting his belt.

"No, too many people will see you come in." She scrubbed her face.

"Why does it matter, people know we're friends," Hopper argued.

She reached over and turned off her alarm. It was set to go off in 20 minutes so there was no point to keeping it on.

"Donald usually gives me a long lunch when I volunteer for doubles so I'll just come back here."

"I can bring you lunch here," he tried again.

Joyce almost called him needy. But she knew that wouldn't be funny

so much as it would hurt him. He was needy, but he was generally good at hiding it. She could tell that their fight over him helping at the lab and her avoiding him for two weeks had affected him. It had affected her too, but not to that extent.

Something that first felt like a betrayal shifted over the days of their separation. The more she replayed the things he'd said, the more she understood why he'd done it. They never talked about anything, a mutually agreed upon rule, so of course he hadn't dropped an announcement of "hey, quick notice, working for bad guys now! I've got good reasons for it though!"

And all of that aside, she missed him. Trying to ignore the ache of familiarity hadn't worked. Joyce's only focus for so long was keeping her head above the water. Not even her own, really, she was fine drowning as long as she could provide enough buoyancy for Jonathan and Will to stay above water. And the thought of adding another person to prop up, her arms felt heavy and unable to swim just thinking about it. But maybe she was going about it the wrong way.

Where first she had to beg for his help, now he was willing to bend over backwards, offer it up freely. Taking his support could mean something for her. Not for the boys, they still needed to be left out of the equation, but right now, he could be something for her. A person to rely on.

Then again, she remembered the fights. That's all they did. Fight and fuck. Non stop. Years ago she'd known it. That wasn't healthy. They knew each other too well and could sting in those weak spots, knocking each other over. It was time to start trying to be nice.

"Yeah," she said. "Bring me lunch here, around two. After you leave I'm gonna wake Will up. He's going to some AV Club thing. He'll be there all day according to Mr. Clark."

"It's still summer," Hopper said.

"It's an extracurricular and the boys like it." She stretched her arms over her head. "Besides, I don't have to worry about him being home alone that way."

He'd finished getting dressed and leaned over, an arm on each side of her, caging her in.

"I'll see you at two then," he said, giving her a peck, but it turned into one, two, three of them.

"Get out of here," she said, shooing him out and he went, begrudgingly.

Joyce went about her day after he left. She showered for work, Will woke up without anything weird happening, (thank god, lightbulbs didn't grow on trees and she had to be away from him today.) She dropped him at the middle school and worked her first shift, it was busy. People buying school supplies and getting excited about the new school year. She was mostly terrified of something happening to Will. But she pushed it to the back of her mind and went on checking people out.

When she came home around two, Jonathan was still gone. She checked his scribbled work schedule on the fridge and saw he was working until nine. Joyce made a face, realizing that meant she'd have to cook dinner. Hopefully she had a box of mac and cheese in the cupboard.

Before she could check her blue box supply, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," she hollered, assuming it was Hopper, but the door didn't open.

The dog barked and Joyce ran through the people who could be at her house in the middle of the afternoon, her fingers started to fidget.

"Hello, Mrs. Byers?" a tall woman with grey hair in a top knot greeted her on the other side of the door.

Joyce tried to stamp down the panic bubbling in her. She swallowed and plastered on a fake smile, unsure of what the woman needed.

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"Can I come in?" she asked.

“You haven’t even told me your name so maybe we’ll start there,” Joyce said.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m Dr. Caroline Lyman. I work at Hawkins Lab with your friend Jim.”

A mixture of hope and weariness overtook Joyce. She wanted to hear whatever this woman had to say, but she also remembered that Hopper deemed this woman untrustworthy. She didn’t look untrustworthy to Joyce, though. She looked like a piano teacher who might hit your hands with a ruler like the one Joyce had when she was seven, but not like someone who might steal Will away and experiment on him.

“Uh, alright, well, come in.” She opened the door wider and gestured to the couch. “Can I get you anything? A Diet Coke? Water?”

“No thank you,” Dr. Lyman said, cheerfully, as she sat on the couch. “Is your son here?”

Joyce instantly tensed up. “No way, lady. I don’t even let my boyfriend interact with my kids and you waltzed right into my house. This is going to be a very short discussion if you don’t slow down.”

“Jim is your boyfriend?” she asked, unperturbed by Joyce’s sharp statement.

Joyce floundered for a second, her mouth opening and closing a couple of times, she hadn’t even realized she’d said it. Her brow furrowed while she gathered her words. She’d spent months not telling anyone about her and Hopper, she’d been so adamant that he not tell anyone, and now in the first three minutes of meeting a stranger she’d let the information go like it was nothing.

“Why are you here?” Joyce asked, deciding to skip the boyfriend thing altogether.

“I’ve long held a theory that your son has...” she paused and worked her hands in a circular motion around each other. “A little souvenir from his time in the, what did Jim call it in the report? Oh, yes, the Upside Down.”

“What do you call it?” Joyce didn’t sit down on the couch, she stood over the woman, her arms crossed, hopefully in a menacing fashion.

“They call it Dimension D. Other people call it the other side of the gate. I like to think of it as where the Samples live,” Dr. Lyman was thrilled to explain and it was odd, the way she was excited about it. It only held terror for Joyce.

“So what is it that you think is happening with my son?” she couldn’t help but ask. “I mean he’s fine, but what kind of a theory are you working on and why?”

“The report I read leads me to believe that he’s got some slugs in him.”

The scientist went on for five minutes, explaining why she thought Will had slugs in him, she talked about the tentacle that Hopper pulled out of Will when they’d found him in the library. She talked about what she called temporal disturbances, where parts of town measured some kind of energy. It was a lot to take in, even if she’d heard part of it from Hopper the night before.

“But,” Joyce interrupted her. “If he had those slugs in him, which he doesn’t, because he’s fine, if he did, how would you treat him? How would you help?”

“First he’d need an x-ray, so I can determine what would need to be removed and verify that the slugs aren’t attaching themselves to any vital organs.”

Joyce gulped. “And then?”

“Then I’d remove them, surgically, kind of like a c-section, did you have a c-section?” Dr. Lyman asked and Joyce shook her head. “Well, not exactly like a c-section because I wouldn’t be cutting into uterus, I’d be going into stomach. Ha! I assume your son doesn’t have a uterus. Anyway, it wouldn’t take very long. I’d keep the slugs for research and you and your son could forget any of this ever happened. Well, I assume with lots of therapy you could put it all behind you, I can’t really think anyone will forget about the time they were taken into an alternate dimension.”



Dr. Lyman chuckled to herself, like this was all a quaint story. It made Joyce squirm. The door opened and Hopper came in with a brown paper bag.

“Joyce, the dog’s shitting in the rose bushes again. I swatted him so I don’t wanna hear you say I’m spoiling-” he paused when he took in who was sitting on the couch. “What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were a vampire that only came out at night.”

“Vampires aren’t real, Jim,” Dr. Lyman said.

“There’s an alternate dimension in my town so you must understand my ability to suspend disbelief,” he said, annoyed.

“I was just explaining my hypothesis about Will Byers to your girlfriend.”

Hopper turned to Joyce surprised but she looked away quickly, biting her lip. She noted that he didn’t correct Dr. Lyman but his face was telling. They were adults, they didn’t need titles like that, also the idea was to not tell anyone what was going on so...maybe he’d forget about this moment and she would never have to mention it.

“You have no right to be here.”

“I wasn’t sure you were going to relay the information correctly. I thought she might want to hear it from the source.” Dr. Lyman gave an awkward smile.

“Joyce, can I talk to you in the kitchen?” he said, without taking his eyes off Dr. Lyman.

Dr. Lyman shamelessly stood up and walked to the front wall of the living room. “Is this the wall where the specimen came out?”

“Yes,” Joyce answered. “If by specimen you mean scary thing with long arms and no face.”

“Exciting!” she said, touching bits of the wallpaper.

Hopper stood at the backdoor, as far away as he could get from Dr.

Lyman.

"You shouldn't have let her in here."

"Since it's my house," Joyce started but Hopper rolled his eyes.

"Fine, your house, but you should kick her out."

"I want to hear what else she has to say." Joyce crossed her arms again, but she stood up straight, trying to make herself taller.

"We can't trust her. You can't let Will in that lab. God knows what will happen, don't let her talk you into this," he said, softer.

He didn't try to make himself bigger. He didn't need to be bigger but it was something that Lonnie used to do, tower over her physically to try and gain the upper hand. Hopper didn't, though if he wanted to gain the upper hand he could just say something mean and hit right where it hurt, so she shouldn't have been impressed that he refrained from physically intimidating her.

"You don't get a say," Joyce pushed.

"Why not?" Hopper's voice raised but just barely.

"Because he's *my* son!"

"I understand and respect that but I'm the one with the previous experience of whacky, classified, make you sound crazy, military experiments and secret government projects, so maybe you could defer to me, in just this one. Goddamn. Thing." He ground out the last three words like he might convince her but she didn't care.

His face was getting flushed but he still hadn't yelled.

"I want to trust her," Joyce tried for honesty but he shook his head.

"Oh, well, that's great. Remember that time they drugged me, drove me to my house, put a bug in my light fixture and expected me to act like everything was fine? What about the time they produced an eerie replica of your kid and had paramedics fish it out of the quarry like it was his real body and then you buried it! They covered up multiple

disappearances so the monster they made could go on killing people.”

Dr. Lyman cleared her throat. “We didn’t make the monster, neither did Brenner’s people, they just discovered it and may have let it into this plane of existence.”

“Shut up,” they both said, simultaneously.

“You said these weren’t Brenner’s people. You told me that. And our lives aren’t exactly normal at this point and what else would you have me do?”

“I don’t know! But not this, it’s dangerous.” His tone was sincere but everything was dangerous right now.

“We have no other options. I have no other options,” she said, feeling her voice waver. “I have to help Will.”

“Let’s go up to Indianapolis,” he blurted out.

“What?”

“To the children’s hospital there, it’s top notch, they’ve got a shit ton of specialists, they’ve got every fancy new doohickey, machines and computers, and MRIs, we’ll take Will up there.”

Joyce laughed, humorlessly. “I can just hear me calling for an appointment, ‘yes, I need you to direct me to the specialist that handles interdimensional slugs, yes, i’ll hold.’”

“It’s a good hospital and it’s better than her!”

“It’s where your kid died. That’s hardly where I wanna take mine.” She paused, waiting for his face to crumble.

It landed solid but instead of breaking him, Hopper stood fuming.

“You don’t get a say,” she repeated, more gently this time, fully aware of the bomb she had to detonate to get him to stop arguing.

But he didn’t rush out or fire back at her. He clenched his jaw and shouted into the living room.

"Hey, you, lady who is three seconds from licking the wallpaper," Hopper taunted Dr. Lyman, who still stood checking out the wall. "When do you want to do this? I don't want Dr. Gordon to know about it. Will and Joyce won't be in your building longer than four hours. I want a clear line of sight on you while you're operating on him and I'm bringing my gun I will shoot you dead if you try any bullshit."

"Hop!" Joyce scolded.

He turned and looked at her. "If you're making dumb choices then I'm gonna be there to make sure it doesn't go as badly as it could."

"Maybe I don't want Pig Pen and his curse of bad things floating around," she snapped, but he actually smiled.

"Too fuckin' bad."

She wouldn't tell him, but it was sweet, the way he was willing to help in his own, spiteful way.

Despite his very serious threats, Dr. Lyman was unflappable. "I can do it on Thursday. If you don't want Dr. Gordon to know we need to do it early in the morning, around six."

"I have to work on Thursday," she started. "What about Wednesday? I have a late shift, it's easier to switch those."

It was silly, making this ridiculous arrangement like a hair appointment or something. But it had to be done. She hadn't gotten this far to chicken out.

"Wednesday at six," Dr. Lyman said, patting the wall one last time. "Come into Lab 35. Not the one I'm usually in."

"Okay," she said, feeling her hands start to shake.

It was going to be a nerve wracking couple of days.

Dr. Lyman left as unassuming as she'd come. Hopper didn't even wait for her to leave before sitting down at the table and opening up the bag.

"I got you a turkey hoagie," he said, pulling the wrapped sandwich out of the bag and getting his out.

"Thanks, but I'm not sure I can eat it now."

"You have to go back to work, try and eat it. You won't be feeling so hot if you don't eat between now and Wednesday."

Joyce took a deep breath and nodded.

"Thanks, for the other thing too," she said, opening up her sandwich but keeping her eyes on him. "I shouldn't have said the thing about-"

"It's fine. You just needed me to listen to you, I get that." He chewed and didn't look up at her. "I'm trying to listen."

"Maybe in five or ten years we'll figure this out," she said, without thinking.

"Gonna keep me around that long?" he asked, a half smile on his face and a piece of lettuce on his chin from his sandwich.

She reached over and brushed the lettuce off but gave him a stern look. "For the sex. You're okay at that."

"Thanks for the glowing review," he said, his mouth half full of sandwich.

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The rest of the day went by in a haze. Customers came and went and Joyce checked them out as though her body was on autopilot. By the time she made it to Karen's to pick up Will, she wasn't completely sure she'd actually worked all day.

"How was AV Club?" Joyce asked Will when he got in the car.

"Good. We're planning a bake sale so we can get the most high tech radio ever, it's a-" Will babbled on happily and Joyce tuned him out.

She hated doing that, she tried so hard to listen when her boys spoke to her, but the fog in her brain was taking over. And then she

remembered, she had to tell Will. It's not like she could just wake him up day after tomorrow and tell him to get dressed to go have a surgery he didn't even know he needed.

"Will, honey," she said, interrupting his long winded explanation about radio frequencies.

"Yeah?"

Now that she'd gotten his attention, she immediately regretted her attempt to start the discussion without some kind of a game plan. She'd have to wing it, shit, she was bad at winging it.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, nonchalantly as she could manage.

"Uh," Will looked out the car window. She ached for him because he must've known there was something wrong but he hadn't told her about it. "I'm cool."

"Will," she tried, gently. "You didn't wake up two days ago. And a couple weeks ago Hopper found you wandering the street in front of McDonald's. The day your dad was here, do you remember that? We didn't talk about it, but do you remember?"

He looked away again and leaned his head on the car window. "Do we have to talk about it now?"

"We can talk about it now or after macaroni and cheese."

"I ate at the Wheelers'."

"Okay, we could talk about it over some oatmeal cream pies, before you go to bed." She dangled his favorite snack and was glad to know that she had a secret box in the back of the pantry. "I understand that you might not want to talk about it, but it's really important we do."

She parked the car in front of the house and sat for a minute. Will did, too.

"Where'd you hide the oatmeal cream pies?" he asked, a little smile on his face.

“I’m not going to tell you, but let’s go get one.”

Joyce’s heart could have burst at the way he looked at her excited. He and his brother were her whole life and even all the panic and nerves of everything, this was the right decision. She had to help him. It was worth whatever the risk.

She sent him to put his stuff up in his room while she dug the Little Debbie box out of the cupboard where she kept the cookie sheets. If he knew where they were, he’d eat the whole box every time.

“Are those both for me?” he asked when he came into the kitchen.

“Geez, can’t I have half of one,” she teased. “Greedy.”

He pulled the first one out of the plastic and split it in half, giving her one half.

“Thank you, kind sir,” she said, dramatically.

“Mom,” he groaned, putting his own half almost completely in his mouth.

“Chew, chew, oh my god, chew! That’s gross, no one wants to see you eat like that!”

He laughed and she tried not to encourage the behavior by laughing herself. He gave an exaggerated gulp and licked his lips. Suddenly he shifted.

“I didn’t want to tell you because you seemed really...happy since I got back.” Will didn’t look at her, he looked down and smooshed some crumbs on the table with the pads of his fingers.

“I am happy, I’m happy we got you back. Nothing you say will change that.”

He kept his eyes on the crumbs. “Sometimes I see it, the place, sometimes I’m just sitting around, reading or watching TV and I see it. Everything switches and it’s cold.”

Joyce felt a lump in her throat form.

“And sometimes I...” he paused and Joyce felt her knee start to bounce in anticipation. “Sometimes I see stuff. Like slugs.”

“See them where?” she asked, trying to be calm.

“I feel them come up.” He made a sweeping motion with his hand, from his stomach up to his throat. “And then they’re gone.”

“Baby, I think, I don’t think you’re imagining those. I think they’re real.” He looked up at her quickly, his eyes wide.

“They taste bad.”

“Oh sweetie,” she said, reaching for his hand. “There’s a doctor, she says she can help you. We’re going to see her on Wednesday and she’s going to get them out of you. Is that okay? Do you want that?”

If he didn’t want it, she’d come up with some other plan, maybe even that hospital in Indianapolis Hopper mentioned. Will deserved to have a voice in this.

“Is it going to make everything stop? I don’t want to see the place anymore. I hate it.”

“I don’t know,” she answered, honestly. “We hope so though. That’s the goal.”

Will drummed the fingers of his free hand on the table a few times. She hated how he’d picked up some of her nervous habits. That was the problem with having kids, you couldn’t control what they got from you, they would get the best and the worst, all tossed in one package.

“There’s nothing good on TV on Wednesday anyway,” he said with a shrug and a brave smile.

“Alright, Wednesday morning then.”

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**August 8, 1984**

Hopper was wide awake. It was four in the morning and the stars were still bright, but he'd been in and out of sleep since he tried to go to bed at midnight. He asked Joyce if he should come over last night and she brushed him off. Jonathan was coming home late and leaving early and she didn't want there to be any overlap. No talking, no telling the boys, the rules were still in full effect.

He rolled over and looked at the clock, 4:02.

Fuck it, he was going over there.

He slipped in the backdoor and the dog was waiting, tail wagging. Hopper gave him a treat and started a pot of coffee.

The big overhead light turned on and Hopper jumped, he turned to see a crumpled looking Jonathan.

"Jesus, need to put a bell on you, kid."

"I'm the one that lives here, not the guy breaking in."

Hopper gave him a long suffering look. "I'm taking your mom to the thing this morning."

"The sun's not even up, aren't you absurdly early," he asked.

"I couldn't sleep, so I came early," Hopper replied, leaning back on the kitchen counter. "Aren't you supposed to be going to work?"

"I have a defective father and an overanxious mother, I don't need a third parent bugging me about my work schedule."

Hopper laughed. "Defective is the best way to describe your dad, I'm gonna use that."

Jonathan just sort of glared at him, either because he was tired or because he was irritated. Hopper guessed a mix of both.

"I liked you better when you weren't sleeping with my mom."

“Do not say that to your mom.”

“Like I wanna have that conversation with her,” Jonathan said, wandering off to get his shoes.

“That makes two of us,” Hopper muttered.

Jonathan left without any more comments and Hopper saw it was still early enough, he slipped into bed with Joyce, fitting himself around her, pulling her close with an arm around her middle. He kissed the back of her neck, and closed his eyes for a few minutes of rest before her alarm would go off.

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Lab 35 was on the third floor of the main building of Hawkins Lab. Hopper knew which halls had cameras and which didn't, and sure, he'd driven in through the main gate and walked them in the main entrance, but from there, he tried to keep Joyce and Will off camera as much as possible. It took three times as long but taking the long way made him feel safer.

Will's skin matched the particular shade of green that Hopper knew from experience meant someone was going to puke. But he didn't. It was almost like he was in that trance again. But he said a few words to his mom and responded when she spoke to him, so he wasn't that far gone. Probably just nervous about what was going to happen.

The lab had a large main room with some chairs and a gurney, then through a large window, Hopper saw an operating room on the other side.

Dr. Lyman came in, wearing black scrubs and her reading glasses. “Glad you made it,” she said, in between chewing something.

“Are you chewing bubble gum?” Joyce asked, her brow furrowed in that familiar way that.

“It steadies my hands,” she said as if that explained it. “There's a gown there, hurry up because I've got to get an x-ray and get him opened in four hours.”

"You don't really have to do it in four hours, I'd prefer you make sure to do it well rather than quickly," Joyce told her, putting a hand on Hopper's chest when he tried to reply.

"Dr. Gordon usually comes in around noon so I think we have a little bit of wiggle room." She shuffled over to the surgery and Joyce picked up the gown and handed it to Will.

"I think," she started and looked around, her head swiveling so quickly it might have made Hopper dizzy on another day. "Yes, right here, there's a bathroom you can change in, sweetie. Do you want help?"

Will shook his head. "I can do it, I'm not a baby."

"Right," Joyce said.

Will got dressed and Hopper stood around feeling out of place. He checked the room for cameras, there weren't any visible. He shut the door and locked it. If someone else came looking, he wasn't going to let them in. When Will was ready, Dr. Lyman had him lie on the gurney, she put an IV in him and Hopper had to look away. This was becoming a little too familiar and uncomfortable for him.

"I'm going to have you count backwards from 10 when I put this mask on you," Dr. Lyman explained while Joyce held onto Will's hand tightly.

"It's going to be okay, I'll be right here when you wake up," Joyce said, her voice shaking.

"Yeah, and Dr. Lyman knows I'll shoot her if she screws anything up," Hopper added, hoping to comfort Joyce but she glared at him.

"Hopper!"

"No, Mom, it's okay, it makes me feel a little better," Will said and Hopper tried to ignore the pride blooming in his chest.

"Here we go." Dr. Lyman put the mask over his face and started counting backwards.

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It was two hours before Dr. Lyman started pulling slugs out of Will's incision. They'd been sitting in a couple of plastic chairs that made the nerves in his legs tingle. Every half hour or so he'd get up and take a lap around the room. Joyce didn't leave her spot once though. She kept her eyes on the surgery and he worried she hadn't even blinked. Intermittently she'd grab his hand and squeeze the shit out of it. They barely spoke. It would have been excruciatingly boring if it wasn't so important.

So when she started to pull the slugs out, Hopper got a little thrill. It wasn't boring now. He remembered the sizes of the ones Dr. Lyman had in her lab, the big one, the medium one, and then he cringed thinking of the tiny ones in the big clump of liquid. He hoped that wasn't an issue for Will.

Dr. Lyman spoke, there was a speaker and her voice boomed into the room. "I think I've got them all. I'm gonna take another quick x-ray and then I'll close him up."

Joyce finally closed her eyes. He saw a tear fall down her cheek and she swiped at it quickly. He put his arm around her and she relaxed into his side, as much as she could while they were sitting on the damn plastic chairs.

"Almost done," he whispered to her and she nodded her head and looked back in time to see Dr. Lyman stand behind a half wall, hit some buttons on the computer, and snap the x-ray.

"Splendid! I've got them all! I'll close him up now," she said with a bounce in her step.

Joyce let out a heavy sigh and stayed huddled into him until an hour later when Dr. Lyman wheeled Will back into the room. Then she sat by the gurney, holding his hand and moving hair off his face, until he started to come out of the anesthesia.

Hopper looked at his watch. "You're right on time, doc."

"I'm punctual in all things," she said, her eyes looking wild. "I

wouldn't recommend having him walk out of here. Take the gurney down to the elevator at the end of the hall, there's an emergency exit that I've disabled so you can go out that way. But you'll probably want to bring the car around. Don't let him have food for another hour or two but he can have water. The incision is small, but make sure he doesn't do any running or sports for a week or so.

"Shouldn't be a problem with this one, he's a baby nerd, like you guys."

He was surprised to feel Joyce's hand smack the back of his head. "Be nice."

He grumbled and rubbed the back of his head.

"Thank you," Joyce said to Dr. Lyman before she left.

Dr. Lyman just gathered her containers of new slugs and headed off like a kid who'd tricked a parent into ice cream for breakfast.

"Where are you gonna tell them you got those slugs?" Hopper called after her.

"I'll think up something. See you later this week, Jim."

They gathered Will's clothes and Hopper realized they'd need to remove his IV so he did it as delicately as he could. Will was groggy but he didn't complain or say much. When they made it to the elevator, Hopper felt like they were practically home free, but he remembered he'd have to bring Joyce's car around.

"I'm gonna get the car, you stay in this elevator, push the stop button and do not let go. That way no one can get in and no one can see you. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"How am I going to know it's you so I can open the elevator?" Joyce asked, concerned.

"You'll know."

He got out, went through the emergency exit that was right by the elevator, he walked to the car in the furthest parking lot, and drove

over to the door without anything eventful happening...until he opened the emergency exit again and saw Dr. Gordon at the end of the hall.

"I didn't know you were coming in today," Dr. Gordon said, stopping halfway down the hall.

"Forgot my favorite pen," Hopper lied, putting his hands on his hips to make it easy to reach for his gun if he needed to.

He tasted adrenaline and tried to keep himself from running or doing anything stupid.

"Your last report was short. I know you hate doing them but--"

"Got it, more flourish and fun when I write the next one. Deal, boss." He gave him one of the fake salutes to sell it.

Dr. Gordon bought it. He turned into one of the offices and Hopper practically sagged in relief against the metal elevator doors.

"It's me, open it," he said, knocking on the door.

"That's your genius way to let me know that you're here," Joyce said when the doors opened. "I can't believe we've survived this long."

Hopper scoffed. "Let's get out of here, you can berate my plans later. When we're home and safe and not in a secret government facility."

He knew from his walk to the car that there wasn't a ramp, so he picked up Will and had Joyce get the door.

"Jesus, what does this kid eat?" he huffed under the weight of him.

"He hit a growth spurt, he's taller than me now, you know," she said like they were just having a regular conversation, not sneaking out after a shady surgery.

"Thanks for letting me know after I picked him up."

"Stop whining," she said, opening the car door.

By the time they made it home, Will wanted to walk on his own into the house. Joyce insisted on being right next to him, but Will was exasperated. He could see now how Will might feel smothered by Joyce's behavior but he understood her reasons.

"Do you wanna watch TV? Or a movie? I had Jonathan pick up some rentals that you might like."

Will shook his head. "Maybe later, can I just take a nap?"

"Of course," she said, following him into his room.

Again, Hopper felt out of place and useless. He wasn't even sure he should stick around, but just as he was considering leaving, Joyce pulled Will's door shut.

"Wanna watch Family Feud and fold laundry with me?"

"Sexy offer. I'll get the basket."

"I'll get the Diet Coke," Joyce said.

After the laundry was folded in (more or less) neat piles on the coffee table and Richard Dawson had asked the families all the ridiculous questions, Joyce rested her head on his knee and looked up at him.

"Do you think they'll find Eleven?" she asked, concerned.

"If they do, I'll know, I'll be able to help her."

Joyce took a deep breath and worried her bottom lip between her teeth

"Is it over?" Her eyes weary and hopeful at the same time.

"Yeah," he said. "For Will and for you, I think it's over."

This was enough. They were learning at a glacial pace how to talk to each other. They'd still fight and say mean things, it'd been a vicious cycle for years. But for now, with or without more monsters on the horizon, as long as they could avoid the conversation, they'd just keep doing this. And for the moment, with all their baggage and

flaws, grief and insecurities, that was as close to normal and as happy as the two of them could get.

**Author's Note:**

You can find me at [cupcakesandtv](#) on tumblr!